Strategies and Ties of Resilience:

Bulgarian Elderly in an Aging and Depopulating Landscape

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ABSTRACT

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This work offers a cross-cultural account of the "aging experience" for elderly in two regions of Bulgaria. It is an ethnographic study that explores the importance of sustained and new (or adapted) interpersonal relationships for elderly in a depopulating Northwestern Village and a small Southern Town and its surroundings in the Rhodope Mountains. Highlighting relationships with family, peers, and neighbors, the study documents how the elderly negotiate and strategize their well-being in spaces and networks increasingly occupied by members of their same age group and despite adversity such as permanently depleting populations. These elders manage to engage in creating and maintaining their networks for instrumental or salient support; participate in peer memberships and interactions for coping and belonging; and negotiate valued and new cultural and socioeconomic strategies and places for well-being.

The study's focus engages with theories of aging; psychosocial, anthropological, and sociological knowledge; and cross-disciplinary conceptions of how groups of people mediate relationships and issues affecting them. It underscores some Bulgarian elders' engagement over disengagement, their nostalgia and coping, and pathways that lead to innovation and resiliency. The study also offers further insight into topics such as "aging in place" and the complexities of human experiences within a Bulgarian context that considers specific histories and processes such as post-socialism and out-migration. As such, the current work contributes to explorations of engaged and adaptive elders aging in place (particularly in relationship to out-migration and

economic forces); to how overlapping histories and experiences create membership within age-cohorts; and on the ways that the elderly cope, adapt, and innovate when traditionally salient family networks are stretched because of economies, depopulation, or distance.

Finally, this work occurs against the backdrop of an aging and depopulating landscape. Issues affecting Bulgaria and its elders include population loss and stages of demographic decline, declining or low fertility rates, and an increasingly aging population across the country but more so within villages. These and other problems have resulted in the elderly expressing isolation; feelings of loss; and economic, social, and personal woes. It has also resulted in the elderly being categorized as a particularly "vulnerable" group within the country, a term which runs the risk of placing them within a realm of complacency or marginalization. Even in extreme situations, many of the elderly I met in Bulgaria remained resourceful and resilient by sustaining or adapting relationships and practices, by creating moments and spaces for coping and companionship, and to meet their need as "still alive" in ways that challenge perceptions of vulnerability or marginality.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Still Living

I was first drawn to a depopulating village in northwestern Bulgaria in 2008 when I heard stories about the struggles its elders faced. Depopulation,[1] a process that has led to "decrease in population and deterioration of demographic structures" (Mladenov and Ilieva 2012:100) in parts of Bulgaria, had reached a critical point. The village was in such a state of final demographic decline that many of the elderly were "aging in place" against great adversity – one of which was the imminent extinction of their community. Scholars have traditionally examined "aging in place"[2] as part of an "aging process" occurring in one's home or life-long community, but have more recently encouraged dynamic explorations of how the elderly negotiate well-being or belonging in places and in relationship to forces such as transnational mobility, globalization, or migration (Johansson et al. 2012; Katz 2009; Sokolovsky 2009).

Migration was one global force affecting the elderly and depopulation in the village. At the time, the people I spoke with estimated the village population to be well under a hundred people, compared to its heyday when villagers claimed it had many hundreds more.[3] Inquiring when

[1] Mladenov and Ilieva define depopulation as a term signifying "a decrease in the total population number (as a result of natural and/or migration decrease)" (2012:99). They also note that their usage of the term "stands for population decrease and deterioration of demographic structures to a scale which leads to permanent impossibility of population reproduction in rural areas" (Mladenov and Ilieva 2012:100).

[2] Katz (2009:465-466) noted that early "aging-in-place" discussions were focused on positive or negative "debates" of aging in "familiar" locations or accommodating these locations for impairment. Scholars today call for and extend investigations to ideas of mobility and movement such as elders in retirement communities or through migration (Katz 2009; Johansson et al. 2012; Oliver 2008).

[3] Villagers' accounts of the population in the Northwestern Village were wide ranged, reflecting people's perceptions of different times and experiences. As chapter 3 will show, statistical data for this village documents its largest population count at 627 individuals in 1934 (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute, National Register of Populated Places). The population fell each year after that to 92 people in 2008 and 89 in 2010 when I last visited it (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute, National Register of Populated Places). The national data primarily reflects information collected at census years.

people thought that their village had been at its peak, many people responded that the village had flourished under socialism[4] (particularly in the 1950s) when they said they had jobs, resources to build village infrastructure, and the means to construct multi-story homes to house multiple family generations. Consistent out-migration, which began in rural Bulgaria during the socialist period in the 1970s and intensified in the later part of the century during post-socialist "transition,"[5] had resulted in most younger family members moving temporarily or permanently away. This limited the elderly's access to emotional, economic, and other family support. The village infrastructure was also almost completely abandoned and thus was vulnerable to crime, the most symbolic of which had been the theft of the village bell which villagers had traditionally used to ring for the dead.

Under such circumstances, the villagers I met were experiencing their elder years in difficult and stressful situations. For example, during a conversation with three villagers I learned that they were getting so old and isolated that only five individuals were left who could dig people's graves. Assisted by a translator who accompanied me in early fieldwork,[6] I asked the villagers to tell me who helped the community with funerals and interment. I was told that because of the declining population and due to their ages (mostly 60 to 80 years old or above), only a small number were capable of the task. I was also told that people who assisted with interment were

[4] As Ghodsee (2010:207n3) noted in her work, people in Bulgaria referred to their past using the terms socialism and communism interchangeably. She wrote that the people she met referred to a time between 1946-1996 as socialist, referred to their past leaders as communist, and recognized that the country never reached full stages of communism (Ghodsee 2010:207n3). I primarily refer to socialism and its associated terms for people's political past experiences within Bulgaria as it was the term I mostly encountered. I use communism when it appears in transcripts, in references to political leaders, and to the "fall of communism" in 1989 though I recognize that terms and some dates can be contestable, complicated, and fluid.

[5] Mladenov and Ilieva (2012) note that depopulation affected a large portion of villages during 1985-2007, a period which dates slightly early than the fall of communism in Bulgaria and which also incorporates when Bulgaria entered the European Union.

[6] A translator assisted me in the field during the beginning of field work in 2008. Her assistance will be explained in more detail in Chapter 3.

either old themselves, had to be asked to help, didn't want to help, or wanted a fee. According to the villagers with whom I spoke, the situation would have been different in the past when the village had more people:

> **Grandfather (from the north[7]):** Back then the houses were full of people and when you hear someone has died, right away…
> **Shepherdess (from the northwest):** –everyone comes–
> **Translator:** Hm-hm.
> **Grandfather:**…they go, one goes to dig the grave, another one helps with something else, this and that.
> **Shepherdess: [**A]nd nowadays you have to go and ask him to come tomorrow at a funeral.
> **Translator:** …so when they hear that someone died they'll just go and it was lots of people on the funeral, but nowadays you…there's no one coming and you have to go and ask them to come.
> **Grandfather:** Back then no one worked for money, and now you have to pay him to ring the bell, now those stole the bell, there is no bell…
> **Shepherdess:** Yes.
> **Grandfather: [**Y]ou have to pay that one 10 leva[8]…and that one who digs the grave–
> **Shepherdess:** –Twenty leva–
> **Grandfather:** –for the grave 20 leva and it's like that.

The villagers' account of their past experiences with burials highlighted several differences from their situation "nowadays."[9] Traditionally, villagers conducted burials with the community's help (see Kaneff 2006:110 on mobilizing neighborhood relationships). While families and friends carried out the main responsibilities, others ("everyone") within the village responded to a death and had a part to play (see also Kaneff 2006:110-116 and 2002:94). Furthermore, the villagers' account underscored an expectation that help was willingly offered in the past. As such, help was

[7] This dissertation focuses on two regions in Bulgaria and often uses similar terms to reference people (such as kinship terms). To help reduce any confusion, locations are noted the first-time interlocutors are mentioned in a block quote. Certain people, such as translators, visitors, mentors, or friends served as assistants or gatekeepers whose locations spanned multiple areas. These people's locations are either indicated more generally within the larger region or not at all. People in the southern region are indicated as from the south or southern area. All other times, locations appear within a chapter section's narrative.
[8] Lev (leva plural) is Bulgaria's currency. As of January 2017, 1 Bulgarian lev equaled approximately 0.55 USD.
[9] The conversation transcript presented in this chapter has been condensed from a larger portion. See Chapter 3 for more information on how transcription and dialogue are presented in this work.

upheld as an "ideal type" and was forthcoming not only from everyone, but also as soon as everyone in the village knew of a member's passing. As one of the villagers noted during the conversation, "People were united before." In their "current" situation, help was no longer a norm. Instead, it had to be sought out and bought – a change between people that implied an ideal type and aspects of people's valued relationships were under threat.

The situation was alarming. When I later summarized it to a friend and mentor in another region of Bulgaria, he was also alarmed. He assured me that "nobody would remain without a decent funeral" in the southern Rhodope Mountain region where he originated. People helped each other he said, whether that be to offer money or lend a hand until a person in need might recover. Speaking from experience, he noted that it was often the women in the region who came together in the case of a funeral, making sure that help was on its way. He referred to this help as an ethos originating from an "old humanity" – a humanity that stressed the importance of interpersonal relationships from family, neighbors, and peers for salient support.

The aging experience in Bulgaria has indeed traditionally stressed the cultural and institutional importance of engaging with social networks and relationships for well-being, particularly that of intergenerational ties. Today, however, consistent population loss and increased population aging have left many Bulgarian elderly growing old in places where intergenerational relationships (particularly that of family and the support they offer in place) are stressed or at risk of dwindling. At the end of 2015, for example, 20.4% of the country was over the age of 65,[10] and the age dependency ratio[11] was at 52.4% (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute (NSI)

[10] This is an increase of .4 percent from 2014 and 3.5 percent compared to 2001 (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute 2015:1).

[11] The Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute defines the age dependency ratio as the "[n]umber of persons in 'dependent' ages (persons under 15 years of age and 65 and more) per 100 persons in 'independent' ages (persons aged 15 to 64 years) calculated in percentage" (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute 2015:3).

2015:1,3). The country's rural areas have the largest percent of this ratio (66.4% in December 2015), and also a significant portion of elderly and depopulating places. The highest concentration of Bulgaria's elderly (and also its lowest population) is located in the northwestern area near to Romania and Serbia (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute 2015:2-6) – one of the areas at the heart of this study. Nevertheless, as this dissertation will show, the elderly I met in Bulgaria have remained tied to networks and strategies that prove them to be resourceful and resilient.

The Elderly in an Aging and Depopulating Landscape

This work is an ethnographic study on the continued importance of sustained and new (or adapted) interpersonal relationships for the well-being of elderly in two regions of Bulgaria. Exploring a Northwestern Village that has undergone hardships to its community, and a small Southern Town nestled in the Rhodope Mountains, it documents how the elderly purposefully and actively negotiate relationships with geographically dispersed family members and with peers and neighbors within their environments and everyday lives for coping and their welfare. As groups and individuals who are aging in place,[12] the elderly are all too aware of their hardships, yet they are "hard at work" strategizing their well-being in spaces and networks despite the stressors in their lives. Rather than succumb to their stress, they are consistently engaged in creating and maintaining networks (particularly with family and peers), participating in group memberships based on shared histories or experiences, and either negotiating valued cultural and socioeconomic strategies or creating new ones. Their work leads to continuities and permutations of key survival

[12] While the present work focuses on issues of out-migration and depopulation, high concentrations of Bulgarian elderly can be aging in their long-standing village communities for a variety of reasons. For example, Kozhuharova and Dobreva (2007) note that many older adults are "return migrants" who retire to their natal villages for reasons such as unemployment, a desire to return home, or retirement. Many of the elderly villagers I met in the Northwestern Village, for example, had grown up in the village, spent a great deal of their adult lives traveling regularly between the village and other areas for work, and had settled permanently back in the village. When they referred to their lives within the village they often referred to youth who "left" – a situation that has left them aging in place.

practices and ultimately to resiliency, an ability to adapt to or manage difficulties despite unfavorable expectations or odds and for more positive outcomes in their lives.[13]

Focusing on issues of aging and well-being in one European country undergoing demographic decline within its borders, the work also contributes to cross-cultural understandings of how some people live out their aging experiences. As the world's population ages, many countries face a variety of challenges such as caring for the extremely old, adjusting pension systems for those living longer, and facing the demographic changes to places and people who are left there. Bulgaria is among them.

Importantly, an aging and depopulating landscape in Bulgaria has resulted in many elderly "aging in place" and in spaces where family and intergenerational ties have been dispersed and stretched, particularly within a context of continuous and extensive out-migration driven by economic reasons. This has caused some shifts in elders' culturally expected and degrees of reliance on family, peer, and neighborhood networks for support and well-being. Having previously imagined and prepared for their elder years with the economic, emotional, and cultural resources of three-generation family households in mind, the elderly I met were instead living together in types of "naturally occurring retirement communities."[14] With whole villages consisting primarily of pensioners, these elders were living together as single generational-age

[13] Definitions of resiliency sometimes stress an ability to "overcome" obstacles and adversity and to do so with high degrees of success or unexpectedly (Hauser and Allen 2007; see Harrington and Boardman 1997:2-3 for varying definitions of resilience). I've avoided using the term "overcome." The elders I met adapted and dealt with challenges that were ever-present and some of which they couldn't fully overcome in the long-term, such as the imminent extinction of communities from depopulation. In addition, positive outcomes that resulted from their resiliency can be viewed as contributing or leading to the aspects of well-being discussed throughout this work, such as conceptions of belonging or companionship derived from their peer-memberships or coping.

[14] Within the anthropology of aging and gerontology, many scholars have looked at "naturally occurring retirement communities," known by the acronym NORCs and defined as "long-standing residential areas where a high density of elders are living in the community," with a focus on urban areas and issues of development (Sokolovsky 2009: 278).

cohorts more than they ever had before, and were adapting ways of living and being in the absence or stretching of family ties in creative ways.

Anthropologists, such as Myerhoff (1980) and Vesperi (1998), have explored ways in which older adults living in communities with high concentrations of elderly creatively and resourcefully maintained engaged lives, despite negative circumstances or perspectives about aging thrust upon them. Examining primarily urban areas where elderly faced isolation because of distant family members, age-segregation, or stereotypes, both scholars documented how some elders grouped together by their circumstances remained "animated" in the absence of traditionally supportive relationships and possibilities for long-term futures (Vesperi 1998:49; Myerhoff 1980:7-9).

Myerhoff (1980:7-9), for example, documented how older Jewish Eastern Europeans with shared histories and experiences created a "fragile" yet vibrant senior center culture in Southern California. She noted that their culture was both "ambivalent" to and "dependent" on peers in the absence of family, and a "major accomplishment" stemming from their past and present circumstances[15] which they negotiated as active agents rather than simply survivors (7-9).

Examining how elders in transitioning communities understood and responded to society's "messages" about old age, Vesperi (1998:49-71) found ways in which some elders seized "possibilities for positive action" through negotiating reciprocal discourse and identities of their past lives alongside their present. Some elders also maintained valid self-conceptions and social engagement by tapping into personal, kin, and peer recognition of shared experiences[16] and

[15] Those circumstances included poverty, marginality, and social isolation. Myerhoff wrote that, "Center culture is in some respects thin and fragile, but its very existence must be seen as a major accomplishment, emerging spontaneously as a result of two conditions that characterize the members: continuities between past and present circumstances, and social isolation" (1980:9).

[16] These shared experiences and relationships included those associated with history, to place and intergenerational-ties with kin, and with work (Vesperi 1998:73-96).

relationships, or by adjusting to changes to these when needed (73-96 on "recognition"). Both scholars' work challenged models and cultural constructs of aging that tended to fix older adults (particularly those in difficult situations) as unable to change rather than adaptive (see in particular Vesperi 1998:95-96).

The current work can be placed within this field of investigation and contributes to larger academic conversations of how, as Victor Turner noted, "…the very old can remain in command of the basic human faculties of insight and imagination until the very end" (Preface to Myerhoff 1980: xiv). It contributes to explorations of engaged and adaptive elders aging in place (particularly in relationship to out-migration or socio-economic forces); of how "shared" memory, histories, and experiences create membership or a sense of belonging within age-cohorts; and on the ways that the elderly cope, adapt, and innovate when traditionally salient family networks are stretched (by economies, depopulation, or distance).[17]

Why Bulgaria and Aging? The Demographic Issues

Many elderly in Bulgaria recount similar struggles and experiences. Facing the consequences of out-migration, vulnerabilities due to both real and perceived isolation, and constant reminders of the disparity between their former and current life experiences, they tell tales of woes. These include economic troubles, separation from people and structures (including institutions), loss of family members or empty homes, and of democracy representing a complex time of transition and change post-socialism. "I am alone" or "Nothing" are commonly used phrases. "Democracy" is distinguished with a unique qualifier that posits a Bulgarian type against an American model. Often, economic accounts bemoan inadequate pensions.

[17] I am indebted to Professor Costley for his feedback and direction towards this focus and field of investigation.

Many elders also complain about depopulation, especially in the rural environment. Rural depopulation has negatively affected villages across Europe for decades though with different rates and intensity. It occurs for a variety of reasons such as decreased birth rates, increased death rates, or steady or rapid movement out of an area for economic, political, or social reasons. At different points of time, long-term negative demographic trends, such as those caused by lower birth rates and higher death rates,[18] have resulted in Bulgaria being ranked among the top ten countries in the world with the fastest shrinking or most declining populations (worldatlas 2016; Myers 2015; novinite.com 2015).

Within the specific context of many Bulgarian villages the depopulation process and its intensification has also led to an "upside down" sex-age pyramid which has resulted in youth "depleting" villages and higher concentrations of elderly in their place (Kozhuharova and Dobreva 2007:58; Mladenov and Ilieva 2012:106). Consequently, and as mentioned before, many villagers in the country are experiencing what it is like to be elderly differently than the generation immediately before them and in absence of relationships that would have traditionally been there.

Looking more closely at the demographic issues affecting the elderly, a World Bank report calls the changes that have occurred in Bulgaria "extraordinary" and outlines peaks and drops in its overall population and fertility rate from the 1950s onward (World Bank 2013:xi). Decreasing population and fertility rates have also led to an increase in the number of elderly within the population (**see Table 1).**

[18] See Mladenov and Ilieva 2012; or Mladenov et al. 2008 for further discussion on negative demographic processes and trends within Bulgaria.

Table 1. Demographic Issues in Bulgaria over Time

	Population Changes*	Fertility Rate Changes*	Percentage of Population by Age**
Example Demographic Data	• From 7.3 million (in 1950) to 8.8 million (in 1990) • From 8.8 million (in 1990) to 7.5 million (in 2010)	• From 2.3 (in 1960) to 1.09 (in 1997) • From 1.09 (in 1997) to 1.5 (in 2011)	In 2013: • Nearly 20% (19.5) of the population was over 65 years • 64.2% were ages 18-64 for viable activities • Only 16.3% were youth ages 0-17

*__Source data:__ World Bank 2013: xi (formatted and organized by author)
**__Source data:__ Population and Vital Statistics, Ministry of Health National Center of Public Health and Administration

Some look at this pattern as creating a "losing cluster" in Bulgaria "where a negative or substantially stable natural dynamic is aggravated by a negative net migration" (Colleo and Daraio 2014:15 based on Eurostat information). What does this mean to Bulgaria within a larger context compared to other countries? It means that the country has one of the highest median age structures in the EU (see **Appendix A**) and that demographic changes will "likely depress" the country's "productivity growth" (World Bank 2013: xi-xii). Furthermore, the population is projected to significantly increase for ages 75 and above between now and 2050 (see **Appendices B** and **C**).

Finally, by the time full research began in 2012, Bulgarian elderly were living off low pensions that comprised less than .1% of the national GDP,[19] had family members in distant cities or abroad, and faced limited infrastructural and material support. Looking at how elderly in these situations manage survival and their continuity offers unique insight into the multitude of

[19] This number represents data around the time of fieldwork and found from Eurostat, Social Protection Statistics, from May 15, 2012. http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/statistics_explained/index.php/Social_protection_statistics.

experiences the elderly encounter daily, especially given the scant English literature on the topic for Bulgaria.

Why Bulgaria and Aging? Continuities and Permutations of Elders' Ties, Practices, and Resilience

Topics such as depopulation, extreme aging, and overall community stress might historically have been examined under salvage ethnography, but this study looks towards issues of well-being and resiliency. When asked what type of future was in store for the village introduced at the beginning of this chapter, some people answered that it might as well be "wiped from the map*"* because they saw it disappearing within ten years. The villagers recognized their situation's severity, and while some said that life was a daily "struggle," most tilled their fields, others lent a helping hand to a neighbor, and a handful socialized (given an opportunity) to alleviate the loneliness found on relatively abandoned streets.

Thus, the current study not only offers insight into the multitude of experiences the elderly in Bulgaria encounter, but it also looks at how some elderly negotiate life despite difficulties in their later years. As mentioned earlier, such insight contributes to and is situated in a larger set of documented aging experiences going beyond Bulgaria such as those explored by Myerhoff (1980) and Vesperi (1998), and which challenge models of aging that disallow for the elderly's creativity, animation, and agency.

This is a fairly new endeavor for studies on aging within the area. What literature that does exist about elderly in Bulgaria has only recently looked to social and cultural topics. These often fall within the fields of sociology or demography, and have primarily been spurred by the rapid socio-economic and cultural changes occurring within the rural landscape and country overall. Before, studies about Bulgarian elderly mainly concerned what Holmes and Holmes (1995: 35,39,49) call "Shangri-Las" (communities of those with extreme age and longevity).

The current study avoids that latter romantic project and focuses on the complexities, continuities, and permutations of both the elderly's experiences and practices – all of which include interpersonal relationships in some way. Looking at the "paradoxes" of "third age" within Bulgarian villages, Kozhuharova and Dobreva (2007:60) stress that what is important when "assessing the Bulgarian case" is the degree of "deep" change that has taken place within the village but that has rendered it dynamic. The stress on change they note:

> …is not so much to the village as a social organism and fixed environment, not to changes stemming from the modernization of social life, the urbanization of living conditions, the forms of work and the building of rural territory, etc. but to the change, the substitution itself of the social subject (Kozhuharova and Dobreva 2007:60).

A deep change to the social subject, which is one of the paradoxes that the authors underscore, is that because of the growing concentration of older adults in villages the elderly themselves are proving more important for the life of the village and even central to it (Kozhuharova and Dobreva 2007:62). Focusing on the elderly's place within rural aging, particularly that of the "return migrant" retiree (another paradox of Bulgarian rurality that adds a dynamic twist to aging in place), the authors list ways in which the elderly prove important (59-60). These include being the core creators of local village economic and social life, its organizers, and the keepers of its reproduction (61-65). In a depopulating landscape, the elderly are becoming more important social subjects not only for their place, but also to each other.

As the next chapter will explain in more detail, the study is guided by theories of aging; tenets of psychosocial, anthropological, and sociological knowledge; and cross-disciplinary understandings of how groups of people (such as those deemed vulnerable) mediate relationships with intimates, society, and a world beyond both. It also contributes to a cross-disciplinary body of knowledge involving post-socialist studies and explorations of the aging experience, further avenues of aging in place, and a focus on well-being and resiliency by:

1. **Emphasizing the importance of sustaining and negotiating interpersonal relationships for Bulgarian elders, either along culturally-valued understandings or permutations of networked relations**.
    - This taps into established debates within the anthropology of aging such as the role of both culture and structure in elders' engagement within their social systems (see Cumming and Henry 1961; Simić 1977).
    - It explores how some elders resist disengagement, stay engaged, and ultimately are tied to engagement.
    - It also examines continuities and change in regional conceptions of and reliance on family and intergenerational networks for the cultural and socio-economic support they offer. This includes extensions and permutations of family types (such as early scholars like Campbell 1964 noted, but others such as Todorova 1989 have questioned) and shifting types of peer networks and group interactions.
2. **Exploring interactionist ideas of how elderly engage in active lines of coping through their experiences, peer memberships, and against dominant social, economic, and political forces in their lives.**
    - This includes examining how the elderly communicate and practice agency against stressors and issues affecting them, such as dwindling populations, limited pensions, and political transitions, despite being listed as marginal and vulnerable.
    - It also extends ideas on how the elderly form a "post-socialist" group, an age cohort with overlapping experiences and histories living in "post-socialist"

times, whose nostalgia helps them cope with the present rather than long for a past (see for example Bošković 2013; Todorova 2009; Velikonja 2009). I argue that the nostalgia used offers "timely tales" that are fashioned and function for elders' coping, personal reflection, and resiliency. Their coping involves conceptions of paradox (Yurchak 2006), irony (Bošković 2013; Velikonja 2009), and reflections (Boym 2001).

3. **Documenting how Bulgarian elderly create pathways and innovations that lead to resiliency**.
    - The documentation includes looking at the strategies that both individuals and groups of elderly use as adaptive, to innovate, and be resilient based on available networks, proximity to relationships, and needs.
    - It explores the established or negotiated places of extended families, neighbors, and friends within the elderly's lives and as salient support. This includes looking at not only interactions but also places such as pensioners' clubs and cafés, and practices among visiting family, neighbors, and even to the dead.
    - It also entails exploring "topographies" of aging as significant spaces used and created by the elderly within their landscape and relational to processes affecting them (see Katz 2009 on "topography"; Tsuji 2009).

Elders Sustaining Support and Well-being Despite Adversity

The purpose of this study is to examine some of the strategies that some Bulgarian elderly use to maintain aspects of well-being. It focuses on two border regions within the country. Originally begun as exploratory work in summer 2008 in a "Northwestern Village" located in the

north of Bulgaria,[20] the current research agenda (and overarching question) asked how the elderly actually lived in spaces increasingly stressed or seen as dying out due to dwindling populations, scarce resources, and the presumed "vulnerabilities" of old age. Further questions asked how villagers perceived well-being, survival and community continuity as pertaining to their everyday lives, and what resources were available to or for the elderly to establish quality lives.

Extending the research questions' reach, thus offering a broader view of "the aging experience" within Bulgaria's depopulating and aging landscape, the majority of field work took place from 2012 to 2013 in a "Southern Town" in the Rhodope Mountains and its surroundings.[21] I visited surrounding settlements close to the main sites to collect and validate the elderly's shared narratives, and to participate in the flow of people that could occur between places (such as with family visiting patterns). The study does not fully draw comparisons between the two areas, instead leaving that up to the reader. It does, however, note patterns of shared concern or experiences among and between the elderly I met.

The study also explores how the elderly actually respond to and negotiate the aging experience despite the hardships and grim realities of a rapidly aging population, few economic opportunities and low pensions, or change to political, familial, and demographic structures. In doing so, it underscores the need for, value of, and sustained emphasis on interpersonal relationships in the Balkans and in Bulgarian elders' lives. Of concern is how elders in villages

[20] The exploratory work also took place in in one of the country's poorest regions. It primarily focused on the villagers' conceptions of their village's past, present, and future. A secondary theme also looked at questions of Vlach identity.
[21] To respect confidentiality, I refer to the two main sites in this study by their regions. Exploratory work included in this study began in the summer of 2008 during approximately two summer months in the Northwestern Village. The last time I saw the village was in the summer of 2010 for a brief visit. Field work during 2012 and 2013 occurred in the Southern Town in the Rhodope Mountains. My time in Bulgaria originally was for a 10 month stay, but was interrupted for two months because of family illness. This necessitated a return to the United States, and then re-entry into the field.

and a small rural town: 1) live and interact against stressors in their lives, 2) strategize well-being and resiliency, and 3) are tied to traditional or new relationships for support.[22]

Preliminary research conducted in the Northwestern Village (the village documented at the beginning of this chapter) revealed stress involving bereavement for the loss of three family generations, for migrant family members who left the area or country for economic pursuits, and for social events held in once lively but now abandoned streets. These themes illuminated that both personal and interpersonal well-being were at risk, something that I would also hear from the Southern Town and that could be considered endemic for the entire country. As such, the original hypothesis underlying the study was that declining interpersonal relationships (relationships which are lifelines for resources and support in the Balkans) might be the main stress that elders in a "declining" community had to negotiate and adapt to more than any other. Moreover, varying degrees of well-being were dependent on the "availability and pursuit of continued, new, and productive interpersonal relationships with kin and social networks to fully (and perhaps innovatively) access resources." (Le Fevre 2012, from dissertation project proposal;[23] see also Dressler 1980 and Scott and Roberto 1987:444 regarding "salient support").

Ground observation also indicated that in the north, well-being was attended to on a much more personal level, with the interpersonal existing but falling more on immediate family than extended. At first this seemed cause for exploration, as it displayed a shift from once very broad and strong kinship networks established in a pre-socialist agricultural community (see Davis-Brown and Salamon 1987 on yeoman types), and from extended kinships ties found under

[22] The original research questions per the study's proposal were two-fold: 1) How do villagers in a village in Southern Bulgaria perceive well-being, survival, and their community's continuity as these themes pertain to their everyday lives and futures? 2) What resources are available to elderly villagers to establish what can be a locally defined quality of life? The research evolved to its current concerns and ultimately revisited and incorporated exploratory work from the north.

[23] Le Fevre, Lisa (2012 [unpublished]) Surviving Material, Personal, and Interpersonal Stress: Elderly in a "Declining Village." Dissertation Project Proposal.

socialism. This could lead to concerns about shrinking networks and loss of support for the elderly, especially if these were now being based on relationships that seemed restricted.

These concerns were valid in the north, however, family networks still existed and primarily extended to members far away, abroad, or who returned seasonally for visits or when there was a need. This didn't mean the networks had been completely lost, but they were no longer located in the village and chances were slim that they would permanently return. These were concerns that many of the elderly I met acknowledged, which posed challenges to their well-being, and which they confronted.

In the south, there were broader networks that involved family, friends, and neighbors. There were also larger populations of people, though the local town was smaller than that located near the village in the north. Villages around the Southern Town also ranged in size from 50 to thousands of people. Like in the north, there was concern around these relationships stretching more than the elderly ever envisioned them.

In both areas, interpersonal relationships proved important when elders employed strategies to ensure their well-being, thus confirming my original hypothesis that above all other stressors was a risk of dwindling interpersonal relationships, which in the Balkan/Mediterranean countries of Southern Europe have been essential for accessing resources and support. To mitigate such stress (and others affecting them), interpersonal relationships and networks are still maintained, adapted, and even creatively used in Bulgaria across age spans, but particularly by and between the elderly when able and available. This finding extends the hypothesis. It indicates that in extreme situations, the elderly I met in Bulgaria have remained resourceful and resilient.

The Dissertation's Landscape (Dissertation Roadmap)

In remaining resourceful and resilient, the Bulgarian elderly I met created innovations and spaces (such as turning an egg shack into a pensioners' club or coffee-time moments with visitors in backyards) for respite and companionship, drew on histories and overlapping experiences within peer memberships for coping and belonging, and negotiated continuities and permutations in social organization and practices for support and well-being. These efforts occurred despite the social, economic, and political processes weighing on the elderly, or categories of vulnerability or marginality placed on them. The chapters in this work draw from and illustrate these efforts, all of which underscore the sustained importance of relationships to the elderly's well-being in Bulgaria.

Part I

The first part of the study situates and contextualizes important background information. It organizes chapters to focus on the study's theoretical underpinnings, on its research design and field sites, and on historical information that is significant to the elderly's lives.

Chapter 2 examines the literature and frameworks that inform the research topic and analysis. As previously mentioned, the chapter looks at cross-disciplinary understandings of how some Bulgarian elders' survival and strategies depend on mediating effective relationships, particularly with family, peers, and neighbors, both within and outside their changing society. In its first part, the chapter provides an overview of the classical psychosocial and cultural debate regarding elders' engagement within their social systems, and sets the stage for adopting an argument that elders' engagement in Bulgaria continues to rely on cultural tenets in ways that endure time and adapt to it (see Simić 1977 on former Yugoslavia). This further sets the stage for stressing and exploring ways that the elderly uphold and are tied to the importance of interpersonal relationships for emotional and socio-economic reasons.

Next, the chapter examines types of and shifts to family, peer, and neighborhood networks to explore ideas about continuities, permutations, and degrees of reliance on relationships in response to stressors in Bulgarian elder's lives. The chapter also moves from intergenerational networks and relationships to examine interactionist thoughts of how memberships among the elderly, for example as age-cohorts with overlapping experiences and histories, allow for their agency and engagement with (or against) dominant forces that attempt to marginalize them socially or economically.

Finally, the chapter looks at the pathways documenting how the elderly might cope and adapt to stress as part of a resilience that is dynamic, creative, and relational to the spaces and people (particularly other elderly) around them. It does this to examine ideas of how the elderly maintain meaningful ways of living and being that are still alive and moving forward (see Randall 2013:9 on moving forward).

Chapter 3 introduces and explains the study's field sites and methods. It includes a look at the help and access afforded to this researcher and her varying roles in a Northwestern Village located near to the Serbian border, and a small Southern Town (and surrounding villages) near to the Greek border. The chapter briefly touches upon some of the demographic composition and historical information important for understanding the context within each location and shifts that have taken place. It also describes the study's methodology such as its reliance on ethnographic methods like participant observation and interviews. A major theme throughout the chapter is how an "ethos" of help (based on networked relationships) contributed to various ethnographic methods from accessing the field to interviews.

Chapter 4 offers a more detailed historical overview and concentrates on time periods within Bulgaria. Aware of hardships and stressors in their lives (such as the risk of dwindling

interpersonal relationships), Bulgarian elderly have historically worked towards and in networks of family and peers for engagement and support. When they speak of their history, the elderly emphasize topics relating to conceptions of these relationships and their demographic compositions. The chapter examines time frames that have had an impact on Bulgarian elders' life narratives, experiences, and strategies. Spanning over 100 years, these include identities mixing at the crossroads of ancient civilizations and Ottoman rule, people and borders affected by territorial disputes within the Balkans and by wars, and experiences (for better or worse) of life prior, during, and after socialism and in "Democracy."

Part II

Part II focuses on groups of Bulgarian elders' experiences and interactions with the dominant issues in their lives, particularly focusing on challenges they face from their social, economic, and political circumstances. It looks at themes such as the elderly's nostalgia, coping strategies, and group memberships in two categories – that of an age-cohort with overlapping experiences and as pensioners. The section also examines how the elderly talk about and deal with some of the stress that permeates their past and present understandings of life.

Chapter 5 begins a discussion of group membership by examining how a "post-socialist" cohort of elderly make up a group whose nostalgia can be seen as functioning for coping, personal reflection, and resiliency. This contributes to research that post-socialist scholars highlight today – the examination of how post-socialist or post-communist nostalgia is more than a longing for the past (see for example Bošković 2013; Todorova 2009; Velikonja 2009). I argue that nostalgia works as "timely tales" for some Bulgarian elderly. This allows for coping along productive lines of communication and as coping through paradox, irony, and reflection (see Yurchak 2006 on paradox; Velikonja 2009 and Bošković 2013 on irony; and Boym 2001 on reflection).

Chapter 6 further explores ideas of group membership, but this time focuses on groups of pensioners. It looks to both the experiences and issues that pensioners include in their narrations, particularly in regards to social and economic situations. Rather than examining this membership within the confines of "vulnerability" or "marginality," the chapter highlights how the elderly negotiate "standards" of living under the current pension system and as retirees.

Part III

Part three culminates in the rest of the result chapters and focuses on continuities and permutations of interpersonal networks. It explores elders' strategies as practices and experiences that they use or adapt as part of time valued network behaviors or new ones. The section also looks at the elderly's engagement in spaces they create for themselves and with innovation as they age in place, for their well-being, and as part of their resiliency.

Chapter 7 looks at the elderly's peer interactions. The concentration is on spaces where the elderly interact together for well-being (such as company) and resiliency, focusing on cross-cultural explorations of the aging experience within a Bulgarian landscape. It examines how pensioners' clubs are places that elders use (and create) to congregate both away from and in response to forces that affect them. It conceptualizes places where coffee-time occur as avenues of sociability, activity, play, and survival. The chapter then moves from coffee-time as a place of significance to that of a larger space, that of neighborhood and neighbors for social support.

Chapter 8 moves from exploring peer interactions, their networks, and spaces to examining family networks and their saliency for the elderly in Bulgaria. Both the elderly I met in Bulgaria and their family members were attached and tied to practices and engagement which worked within cultural paradigms and which responded to stressors. Because many family members are located away at various distances from the elderly who are aging in place (particularly

in rural areas), family ties have stretched and negotiations occur. However, ties continue today especially in visiting patterns. The chapter looks at how the elderly and their family want, choose, or are tied to interpersonal relationships and the social, emotional, and economic support that they bring. It also looks at how practices attached to these ties seemingly follow time-worn behaviors, but are actually working along-side permutations of traditional values in order to allow the elderly to remain resilient.

Chapter 9 takes a final look at the importance of and continued stress on interpersonal ties and social network support for the Bulgarian elderly I met in the Southern Town, areas around it, and in the Northwestern Village. It does this by exploring events and meanings associated with sustaining relationships in life and death. The chapter examines how death anniversaries (*pomen*) and two types of symbolic trees found in a cemetery incorporate and engage relationships with family and friends, socialization, and adherence to a variety of networks and connections. In addition, an examination of how villagers in the Northwestern Village coped with and responded to the theft of their bell which rung for the dead, addresses just how innovative and resilient the elderly I met in Bulgaria have remained.

Part IV

The study's final section offers a discussion of findings from result chapters. It provides conclusions, and offers recommendations for future inquiry.

Chapter 10 concludes the study and discusses key findings in more detail. It provides a deeper review of the literature and how the study contributes to it, particularly in regards to the cultural and socio-economic importance of interpersonal relationships in Bulgaria, and the continuation and adaptation of value-driven elder engagement in these ties and networks. It further outlines continuities and permutations Bulgarian elders actively engage in through their coping

strategies, peer interactions, and innovation. Findings include that the elderly's spaces and innovations are those that either involve sustained or adapted peer, neighbor or friendship, or family networks in culturally specific ways. These document the aging experience for some elderly within Bulgaria. They also lend themselves to further lines of inquiry and research possibilities with post-socialist and cross-disciplinary takes on aging experiences, landscapes of aging in place, and the promotion of studies on aging and resiliency.

Towards Resiliency

This study highlights that despite adversity, the elderly I met were able to respond to stressors in their lives through various means from their interactions and practices as group members to creating spaces where they can cope, find respite, and continue or adapt permutations of social organization and culturally valued behavior. The elderly were also able to create innovations and spaces that offered opportunities to socialize, stay active, and seize opportunities for salient support. All of these efforts further helped to sustain or alter group dynamics in ways that proved resilient and fostered the elderly's well-being.

The chapters in this work explore and document examples of how a sample of elderly living in Bulgaria create well-being and remain resilient against stressors in their lives. The study does not aim to generalize to the entire elderly population within the country. Also, when employing the ethnographic present, the study does not aim to imply that people or cultures are bound. People's experiences and practices differ and span a variety of behaviors, settings, and variations within the culture itself. These experiences and practices, like the elderly I met, are part of living systems that are permeable, require analysis that is flexible, and are not homogenous entities.

Instead, the study reports patterns of experiences, narratives, negotiations, and behaviors encountered among the elderly that I met within the two field sites. The methodology used limits

conclusion to the study's populations and those that might be similar.[24] However, the study does highlight areas of shared concerns for the elderly such as with some of the stressors affecting their lives – the greatest of which is a risk of dwindling interpersonal relationships within an aging and depopulating landscape, particularly in areas of extreme demographic decline.

As such, the study offers a unique look at how certain elders age in place and remain resilient within areas of Bulgaria so as to contribute to the larger repertoire of the "aging experience" and to explore further insight into human experiences and their complexities.

The study also illuminates other areas for future research and development. Although not exhaustive, recommendations include:

- Merging fields of investigation and topics from post-socialist studies, communications, the anthropology of aging, and other aging studies[25]
- Enhancing disciplines already taking place in the region, such as with the "Sociology of Aging," (see for example Perek-Białas and Hoff's 2012 work) with more qualitative contributions and cross-disciplinary frameworks
- Further examining cross-cultural examples of the elderly's agency rather than their vulnerabilities
- Documenting and exploring additional spaces and landscapes where the elderly are aging
- Adding to new scholarly directions that define and explore well-being and resiliency for the elderly

[24] Conclusions are also primarily drawn from the qualitative methodology and analysis used.
[25] As Chapter 10 will explore, one way to merge fields of investigation and topics could be through employing frameworks such as "co-cultural theorizing" (Orbe 1998; Orbe and Roberts 2012) within post-socialist takes involving nostalgia.

As Bulgaria faces a significant aging population by 2050, an ultimate hope is that the current research will underscore the elderly's efforts and creativity regarding human connections and their salient support. It is also hoped that the study will promote further investigations within and challenges to cultural understandings of the aging experience – that of exploring continuities and permutations of interpersonal relationships and practices that the elderly use in Bulgaria to remain resilient in the face of adversity.

Part I

CHAPTER 2

Cross-disciplinary Understandings of the Aging Experience

Looking to cross-disciplinary understandings of the ways individuals interpret and navigate their everyday lives through experiences and adaptation, this work stresses the continued importance of interpersonal relationships on the elderly's survival, coping, and well-being within Bulgaria. It is guided by theories of aging, and taps into the cumulative knowledge offered from psychosocial (social psychological), anthropological (or cultural), and sociological conceptions of what it takes some people to age "well." While many theories within these areas have focused on models explicating aging experiences as they might define "successful," "active," "happy," or "healthy" processes – this work contributes to a growing body of literature that focuses on the cross-cultural variations of the aging experience and on "resiliency."[26] It postulates that while the most significant stressor to the elderly in Bulgaria's rapidly aging and depopulating landscape is the risk of dwindling interpersonal relationships; the elderly are "hard at work" engaging within those networks in resilient ways despite extreme difficulties.

This chapter examines those cross-disciplinary understandings to establish the theoretical conceptions guiding explorations of how the elderly's survival and strategies for well-being in two areas of Bulgaria depended on mediating effective relationships with intimates, one's immediate society, and a world beyond both. It does this by looking at the following key topics:

1. The first topic gives an overview of the classical psychosocial and cultural debate between disengagement theory and cross-cultural postulates of aging. The overview provides a

[26] In Chapter 1, I define resiliency for elders in this work as an ability to adapt to or manage difficulties despite unfavorable expectations or odds and for more positive outcomes in their lives.

context for adopting an argument that the aging experience in Bulgaria emphasizes upholding the cultural importance of engaging with social networks and interpersonal relationships (particularly with family) (see Simić 1977 on former Yugoslavia). As the current work in Bulgaria will show, cultural values aren't the only reasons that the elderly uphold and engage in relationships. They do so not only because they historically value these relationships, but also because they are tied to the emotional and socio-economic structures around them.

2. Because there is an emphasis on the elderly upholding social networks and interpersonal relationships, the next section takes a glimpse of the types of networks that have historically been available in the area. While regional studies traditionally looked at family and intergenerational networks in small agrarian communities, there are many types of relationships available to the elderly. These traditional network relations still exist today, but there are shifts in practices and reliance on them both because of and in response to stressors in Bulgarian elders' lives.
3. Moving from intergenerational networks and relationships, the next topic explores ideas of how membership among the elderly, particularly formed through overlapping histories and experiences, can serve as a source of agency and engagement with dominant socio-economic and political forces in their lives. Bulgarian elders are often defined in both popular and academic portrayals as a vulnerable or marginal group, which runs the risk of placing them within the realm of complacency. This section examines interactionist thoughts that the elderly actually respond and react to stressors, such as isolation or marginalization, through categories of membership in age cohorts in ways that create

meaningful conceptions of belonging. The section also looks at membership and strategizing coping as means of communication and action.

4. Finally, examining how networks, interpersonal relationships, and interaction within group membership allow elderly to respond and react to stressors in their lives brings the discussion to strategies involving negotiating stress and environments. These include looking at both individuals and groups of people – in this case the elderly – as adaptive, innovative, and above all resilient.

Engaging with Cross-Cultural Aspects of Aging and Elders' Engagement

In a seminal article often used in gerontology and anthropology of aging, Simić (1977) argued that the aging experience is deeply entwined in cultural contexts and fabrics that both endure time as well as adapt to it – an assertion that this dissertation adopts. Challenging elements of two theoretical models (disengagement and deculturation), Simić looked at intergenerational relationships cross-culturally between two differing societies that had undergone changes through time – societies in the United States and in former Yugoslavia. He did this to show that contrasting models of aging existed. These models were both based on cultural values and assumptions within society, but they were not universally experienced. In doing so, he posed challenges to Cumming and Henry's (1961) "Disengagement Theory," but more importantly he thrust forth culture's place in conceptualizing the experiences and realities of aging.[27] Before examining Simić's work, however, it is necessary to briefly explore disengagement theory.

[27] The purpose of Simić's (1977) article was not necessarily to negate disengagement practices or to focus on disengagement theory. Instead, the article adds levels of complexity to conceptions of the aging experience by highlighting culture's place(s) in that experience.

Frequently contested, disengagement theory is not without certain merits[28] and is considered one of three classical psychosocial theories on aging.[29] Adopting a structural functionalist approach,[30] disengagement theory claimed that "aging is an inevitable mutual withdrawal or disengagement, resulting in decreased interaction between the aging person and others in the social systems he belongs to" (Cumming and Henry 1961:14).[31] Describing their theory, the authors' noted that their main focus was on interpersonal behavior and identifying changes[32] from mid- to old age that included "attitudes, sentiments, and values, and such changes in the personality as express themselves in interaction with others, and hence in the performance of society's[33] roles" (Cumming and Henry 1961:4). Concerning the social-structural, the theory

[28] Disengagement theory has been recognized as a classical and early attempt at theorizing aspects of the aging process (Maddox 1964:80 referencing Parson's 1961 forward to the work). It offered a conception of aging as a cooperative process between the elderly and society, a thought which was juxtaposed with prevalent ideas at the time (Cumming et al. 1960:23). It was also revolutionary for its time and advanced new ideas on aging. It was the first time, for example, that a theory countered the idea that "happy old people would have to be active (engaged) old people" (Maddox 1964:80). The theory also received much criticism, especially for parts of it that claimed universality. This was seen as oversimplifying aging experiences and overlooking variations within it (Maddox 1964, Hochschild 1975). Nevertheless, disengagement theory opened doors for further scholarly investigations and responses that would refute it, extend it, or add layers to it. Simić's (1977) work approached the latter task with its cross-cultural lens.

[29] These theories can be defined as attempting "to explain human development and aging in terms of individual changes in cognitive functions, behavior, roles, relationships, coping ability and social changes" (Wadensten 2006: 348). The other two classical psychosocial theories on aging include "Activity Theory" and "Continuity Theory." While elements of both these theories could be examined in the current work, I have chosen to "engage" with Simić's (1977) exploration of aging within a cross-cultural framework. In doing so, I am engaging in his explorations with disengagement theory.

[30] Cumming and Henry noted that they were trying to "use concepts and terms that describe both personality and interaction" and were following Parsons in viewing "personality and society as action systems" and interpersonal behavior as "the interface between them" (1961:11).

[31] The theory incorporated data from a study conducted in Kansas City with a stratified sample of "healthy and economically stable" adults (ages 50 to 70) and a "quasi-sample" of "very old" individuals (70 to 90) (Cumming and Henry 1961:15,27; Cumming et al. 1960:24). The purpose here is to provide context for where disengagement came from and to highlight some of its assertions. I do not go over the study's full results and data, though it is important to note the ages in the samples in the Kansas City study because it has been noted that variations of the aging process and stages of disengagement can vary with age as well as other factors, such as economic.

[32] Regarding changes to aging individuals' attitudes, orientations, and personality, the theory examined issues ranging from people's orientations to interaction and perceptions about constricted life space (Cumming and Henry 1961:75-105), to ego alterations, morale, and eventual adaptations (which responded to thoughts on successful aging) (108-134).

[33] Cumming and Henry defined their use of the word "society" in their work. The authors stated that "society" "…refers to those concrete cultural groupings and social systems to which the individual belongs, actually or symbolically" (1961:211).

initially tested the authors' proposals that as an individual aged, the number of relationships within their social systems became sparser, interactions with others in the system diminished, and the system restructured its goals (Cumming and Henry 1961:15-16, 37). This disengagement process happened in different stages[34] and with differences (in degrees, release from role obligation, quality and types of relationships), with the ultimate stage being death. The authors also intended the theory to apply to all societies and claimed that disengagement was a "culture-free concept" though they recognized that its form was bound by culture (Cumming and Henry 1961:15, 218).[35]

In "Aging in the United States and Yugoslavia: Contrasting Models of Intergenerational Relationships," Simić added levels of complexity to the aging experience, particularly emphasizing its cultural aspects, although not diminishing the influence of other structures such as social and economic. Exploring whether disengagement held power outside of the US context, Simić conducted numerous field trips to former Yugoslavia and interviewed people with varying socio-economic status, demographics, genealogies, and more. What he discovered was that while

[34] An important finding the authors make with the Kansas City sample is that there are four stages to the disengagement process, and these stages exhibit different "characteristics" of disengagement with the first stage having none of them and the last all (Cumming and Henry 1961:134). Cumming and Henry note that the three characteristics for disengagement include being "over sixty-five years of age, withdrawn object cathexis, or lack of a central task" (1961:134).

[35] Cumming and Henry (co-authored by Ernest Damianopoulos) eventually outlined 9 postulates in a "formal statement" on the theory. Not listed here in any order, and neither exhaustive nor all-inclusive, other assertions from these that are important to note and could be of interest for further exploration in Bulgaria include: 1) Disengagement is an inevitable process that severs ties between the elderly and other members in society. There are variations in when disengagement happens, with whom it happens, and how completely it happens (with again death the penultimate stage); 2) Reduced interactions can lead to qualitative changes in relationships. They can also lead to freedom from normative control. This freedom in turn can result in self-perpetuating the disengagement process (through eccentricities, difficulty in relating to others, etc.) 3) The individual, society, or both can initiate the disengagement process depending on variables such as readiness, ego changes, or needs associated with role performance. The "ideal case of simultaneous disengagement" occurs when both the individual and society are ready for the release of certain role-obligations. The authors also note that changed roles lead to smaller "social life spaces" for the elderly which could lead to problems unless replaced with other roles (adapted and combined from Cumming and Henry 1961:211-218).

some people choose to disengage from roles and some relationships in old age, not everyone does so uniformly.[36]

Instead, Simić (1977) drew two different models showing how culture affected aging outcomes and well-being amid social changes (e.g. urbanization). In the United States, disengagement at old age occurred more generally because individuals had been reared within an atomized society valuing independence and youthful connections to friendships. Such values catered to active lifestyles and a reliance on friends, and created dependence on age cohorts who, when gone, were difficult to replace. The South Slavic model, Simić noted, looked to the family as the main unit.

The assumed universality in Cumming and Henry's (1961) disengagement theory stemmed from a Western view of the aging process. Simić (1977) noted it did not work in Yugoslavia, where networks of relationships were traditionally essential for bonds and access to resources. These relationships and their role expectations stretched across filial duties, generations, and ties. Disengagement from role obligations in Yugoslavia would actually be seen as something unnatural rather than mutually beneficial for society or its players. Aging there and in other parts of Eastern Europe, as the current study also shows, depended greatly on roles and practices involving positions in networks and salient support across generations – even through shifts and times of change[37] (see for example Scott and Roberto 1987:444 on "salient support"; Simić 1977).

[36] Cumming and Henry (1961:281) also found variations in the process, for example it varied by stages or gender. Also, the authors were not conducting a cross-cultural study and ascertained that disengagement was a "culture-free concept". They did note, however, that disengagement's form was culture-bound (Postulate 9) (see Cumming and Henry 1961:211-218).

[37] Simić (1977) did note that there were some changes to family organization because of processes such as urbanization. Nevertheless, he noted that the aging process was still reliant on intergenerational relationships.

Engaging with Types of Networks and Interpersonal Relationships

Simić's (1977) argument that the aging process in former Yugoslavia relied on the importance of intergenerational contact and interpersonal relationships rather than universal disengagement, becomes important today in an Eastern European context. Today, many elderly in Bulgaria experience the effects of out-migration and depopulation on their relationships. Exploring the values and practices involved in sustaining these networks, and the social support they offer the elderly, is significant for research on Bulgaria because it informs our understanding of the ways that some elders in regions there manage aspects of well-being. It also allows explorations of which types of networks and interpersonal relationships the elderly in the region find particularly useful and to what degree they say or show that reliance on them has continued, changed, or shifted.

Early scholars on the Balkans, such as those espousing the honor and shame school, took note of the many types of values and benefits associated with networks within different Eastern European countries. While family studies on the region focused on conceptions of close-knit family ties in small communities, and Simić's (1977) looked primarily at intergenerational ties, there were also studies on reciprocal relationships within different groups, cultures, and various non-kin. Campbell (1964), for example, beautifully outlined systems of patronage between village friends in a Greek Sarakatsani[38] community.

Going beyond the patronage of patriarchal households alone, Campbell (1964:217-232) noted that relationships included the links and protection of spiritual kin, such as the wedding sponsor, or aligned relationships to power and authority within a village as with being friends with

[38] The Sarakatsani were primarily shepherds who practiced transhumance as they moved between locations seasonally (both within and outside of countries) to graze animals. Their communities were found in Greece and other areas such as Bulgaria. During socialism, border restrictions limited this movement as well as some contact between interpersonal relationships.

the village "President." These relationships offered value through not only the material, but also the social through powerful systems of asymmetrical reciprocity:

> In asymmetrical friendship relations, since it is assumed that the patron has more favours to offer than the client can return, or that reciprocal favours are so dissimilar in quality that accountancy is difficult, there is often greater stability than in friendships between equals, which are very frequently bedeviled by accusations of ingratitude (Campbell 1964:233).

In later literature dealing with socialist countries and post-socialism within the region, studies on reciprocation and patronage passed to examining the state for its effects on patronage as well as a focus on networks for access to resources (see for example Verdery 1996; Burawoy 2000:47 and 1996; or Berdahl 1999). Varying types of relationships in this sense, became important means to reaching a center or strategizing access to goods or sponsorship. The state and mandated changes to values aligning with its directives might be looked at as undermining traditional ties within family networks, such as with a father's patronage (see Creed 1998:132 for example), but family and kin were still important. Or, attempts at constructing associations with local history and lineage may have served as tools directed at cultivating favor from the center as with the case of Talpa, in which a Bulgarian village constructed links to leadership through ideas of familial relations (Kaneff 2006).

Aging studies have also looked at networks. Original studies focused on individuals' close relationships but moved towards examining larger group configurations towards the 1980s and on (see Wenger 1991 for example). Wenger has noted that examining social networks is an apt way of studying the "social aging process where relationships are central" (1991:147). She adds that this further includes looking at networks as "process[es]" that adapt, are dynamic, follow different paths, and have attributes relating to different size configurations (Wenger 1991:148).

Pointing to Lowenthal and Robinson (1976) for example, Wenger notes that women often have more network friendships as a construction found in "western society" (1991:149). In their

study on elderly women and neighborhood networks in Australia, Walker and Hiller explain that the networks that form from age and gender within a neighborhood carry with them social capital that "is central to the way that place potentially influences the health of older women living alone" (2007:1162). Even disengagement theory made gender distinctions allowing for easier network relationships existing among women (Hendricks and Hendricks 1977:109).

The current work on Bulgarian elders adds to the trends within aging and network studies. It looks at practices and places where aging has both continuities and permutations to networks of neighbors, age and gender cohorts, and friends.

Groups of People and Interactionist Perspectives

Exploring practices and values involved in maintaining networks and relationships for the elderly in Bulgaria also incorporates knowledge from sociology and anthropology, interpersonal and interactionist perspectives, and cross-disciplinary theories about how people might experience, cope with, and adapt to stressors in their lives through age cohorts and group memberships. Both popular and academic discourse about Bulgaria's elderly often revolve around ideas that they form a vulnerable population whose membership within society is at risk and marginalized.

An implication of this is that because of poverty and population decline, the elderly are at risk of life passing them by as they are seen passively isolated on outside benches or at home with little opportunity for interaction in the world. This recalls early gerontological theories that hypothesized how the elderly remain active and respond to life through membership in age cohorts as they mature (Hendricks and Hendricks 1977). It also highlights aspects of those debates that look to this membership for the positive group interactions and relationships they provide for the elderly's well-being.

The Aged as Subculture

Part of an interactionist model, Hendricks and Hendricks (1977:112) note that treating the elderly as having membership in a unique group takes into account trajectories concerning people's personal and social roles, their self-identities and group affiliations, and "demographic and social trends." A classical view with aging and inter-group relationships comes from viewing the aged within a subculture.

> As conceived by Rose (1965), the initial advocate of this perspective, whenever members of one category interact more among themselves than with people from other categories, a subculture will be generated. In addition, he suggested there are a variety of demographic and social trends contributing to the genesis of an identifiable age subculture that effectively cuts across all previous statuses to impart to the elderly a sense of group identity over and above earlier memberships. Among the specific factors mentioned by Rose are the sheer numbers of persons beyond the age of 65 who are still healthy and mobile enough to interact..." (Hendricks and Hendricks 1977:112).

Hendricks and Hendricks (1977) further explain that movement into this group identity involves both adopting "solidarity" and also social impositions that separate (almost segregate) individuals:

> As Rose outlines it, individual involvement in an aged subculture depends on the solidarity of the age group itself, plus the nature and extent of contacts retained with the total society through families, the media, employment or the older person's own resistance to aging…Commenting on the development of an aging self-concept, Rose avers that societal institutions, formalized retirement being foremost among them, have imposed an artificial boundary on what is socially recognized as old age. Concomitantly, an aging group consciousness has arisen, fostering an awareness of belonging to a particular group and not simply a chronological category" (Hendricks and Hendricks 1977:113).

Applying ideas about subcultural membership to many of the elderly I interviewed during my time in Bulgaria could be useful when examining how people identify their own situations as part of a larger group – in this case a group that belongs to an age cohort. Rather than merely positioning pensioners at a subcultural level, one could adapt exploring their coping and interactions both as a group and in response to issues. The reasons for doing this is to examine

how the elderly actively express their identities and interactions within their group and in relationship to forces given their positionalities.

A "Post-Socialist" Group of Elderly and their Nostalgia

Within mergers of anthropology and gerontology, such as with aging and communication research, one way to look at age cohorts as they progress through life has been to consider conceptions of group "culture" or experiences. As Nussbaum and Coupland write:

> An age cohort may be seen as having a culture itself that has distinct experiences, values, norms, and use of language. Although none of us age and join successive age group cultures in exactly the same manner, individuals often assess others to determine if the other is an age peer or not and indicate, verbally or nonverbally, their age group membership…therefore, we should ask to what extent a person's age influences how she or he responds to or sends messages. Williams and Nussbaum (2001) argued that communicative exchanges across the life span and into older adulthood become increasingly complex as older individuals have a greater range of experiences to draw on while also needing to compensate for declining abilities. Intergenerational conversation, thus, are likely to require unique communicative approaches that account for distinctions between age segments of the population. However, even when age serves as a membership category, individuals are operating within a system of overlapping cultural systems…(Nussbaum and Coupland 2004: 173).

One overlapping system within which the Bulgarian elders I met were operating, was that of their age cohort experiences post-socialism. As a cohort, many had spent their most productive years and relationships within a socialist era, and when talking about their experiences recounted what seemed to be nostalgic tales. Rather than involving memories and time relegated to realms of liminality or longing, these narratives exposed complex understandings of past experiences and "present" ones in tandem with aging as a group within "Europe" and through "Democracy." Nostalgia became what I now term "timely tales." As "timely tales" they represent coping strategies representing the multifaceted, valid, and living realities of the aged in Bulgaria's Europe.

Scholars within post-socialist studies look at nostalgia a number of ways, although there is a limited literature on the elderly. When looking at nostalgia as "timely" and active coping

strategies, such works that take into account concepts of group reflections and resiliency are useful. These involve looking at categories of nostalgia as "reflective" (Boym 2001), paradoxical (Yurchak 2006), or "ironic" (Bošković 2013; Velikonja 2009). Such examinations place nostalgia as people's attempts of working alongside the present and its structures (Boym 2001) or to "transcend" them (Velikonja 2009:548).

Alexi Yurchak, for example, examines nostalgia vis-à-vis the complexities inherent in everyday life. He stresses that socialist realities and discourse need to be examined as "a system of human values" in all depths and where life may have been "different from the official interpretations provided by state rhetoric" (2006:18). Most authors would agree that nostalgic narratives offer complexities that are neither, as Wolfe (2000:206) notes for Berdahl's (1999) work, "black" nor "white." Rather than binary, Yurchak cautions, they are paradoxical (2006:4, 10-11 on Lefort's Paradox).

Paradoxes also include irony, which scholars analyzing nostalgic tales look at in a variety of ways. Concerning irony as strategy, Velikonja (2009:539) questions whether or not there are "hegemonic ambitions" involved with nostalgia. "Nostalgia criticizes the present," he writes, "however, it is not pragmatic, or even programmatic – it does not have a clear 'plan of action' or an ambition of re-creating the past" (Velikonja 2009:547). He further writes:

> The key to understanding nostalgia is the present, not the past. By insisting that everything was better before, *homo nostalgicus* implicitly criticizes what is wrong now. But not completely: it is not just an automatic reflex to deterioration of conditions of living because it also appears in comparatively successful transitional societies (Velikonja 2009:546).

Velikonja (2009:549) writes that not wanting to return to the past is at the "core" of ironic nostalgic tales. Bošković (2013:54), whose work looks at how nostalgic entries in the *Lexicon of Yu Mythology* are colorful representations to a "colorless present," also explores irony. He does so, however, as a mode and as possible "sites for the archeology of the future" (Bošković 2013:

55). As such, the author takes that work (and nostalgia) "not as a regressive idealization of Yugoslav socialist past, but as a critical intervention in both the contemporary postsocialist politics of memory and the politics of emancipation" (Bošković 2013:55). Bošković highlights moments of "idiosyncrasies" that focus on ironic tales playing alongside time, self-reflection, and the unique "polyphonie" of individual voices (2013:60-61,65 for irony).

Finally, looking partly at how nostalgia is "not merely an artistic device but a strategy of survival, a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming," Boym (2001: xvii) concentrates on two types of nostalgia – restorative and reflective. "Re-flective" nostalgia is interesting when examining Bulgarian elders' nostalgia because, as the author notes, it has "flexibility" without the "reestablishment of stasis" (49). In other words, it has a type of awareness and agency to it with which people move along with the times in order to make meaning out of it (50-51). It does not have to be a longing or return to the past because, writes Boym, "A modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once" (50). As Boym further notes, these tales may seem to follow a sense of time "sideways," "coeval to modernity" and even "prospective" (2001: xiv, xvi).

Pathways and Innovations of Elders Negotiating and Strategizing Stress, Environments, and Resilience

Discussions on how networks, interpersonal relationships, and interaction within group membership allow elderly to respond and react to stressors in their lives leads to exploring negotiations of stress in relationships to people and their place. These include looking at the elderly and their practices as adaptive, innovative, and above all resilient as they age with and among people in spaces and in place.

Scholars have shown that coping and adaptation to stress can be viewed at varying levels along scales of pathways, adjustment, cultural perceptions of a group's needs, mitigation of risks,

and opportunities or access to resources. As Harrington and Boardman (1997:21) note, there has been a diverse array of psychoanalytical thought on how people cope with stress. These have included looking at how people manage adversity and conflict through solely internal defense mechanisms which were primarily seen as neurotic behavior, or examining defense as adaptation and part of coping to external domains (Harrington and Boardman 1997:20 on Anna Freud's and Heinz Hartmann's work). The authors adopt the latter view and assert that "the mechanisms that a person uses in dealing with intrapsychic conflicts are related to how one copes with the problems and obstacles encountered in the external world" (Harrington and Boardman 1997:21).

In addition, discussions about defensive and coping have resulted in scholars examining mechanisms and styles along scales of maturity and productivity, particularly in regards to internal mechanisms. Harrington and Boardman (1997:22) question "the maturity metaphor" for coping dealing with the "outside world" because those that may be the most productive are those that lead to better coping interpersonally.

Other studies that deal with adaptation and change, but in aging, have looked to how individuals negotiate status, roles, and relationships within institutional or age-group settings (Myerhoff 1980; Vesperi 1998; Tsuji 2009); within constricted spaces of their own doing, reminiscences, and food (Scripps 1996), and more. Anthropologists in the field of aging are particularly interested in the various pathways that people take involving their negotiation and adaptation, and the innovations they create. This includes looking at how people resolve "crises" that occur with change. A visionary in this realm, is Anthony Wallace whose theories of change rely on people's resiliency, and abilities to effectively move from stable states to reintegration upon stress (see for example Wallace 2003). Wallace (2003) compares individuals' places in paradigmatic processes as fluid in relationship to their environment.

One can argue that in Bulgaria, many aging individuals mitigate the stresses on their lives through their reliance on networks, which involves adherence to cultural values on interpersonal relationships.[39] The way they do this, also includes permutations of those relationships. As Jay Sokolovsky has noted, worldwide perspectives on aging have proven that the elderly are "not just passive recipients" of culture, experiences or their situational contexts (2009: xxii-xxiii).

Instead, Sokolovsky notes that as people age, "one encounters increasingly varied *scripts* for the life course, new *cultural spaces* and emergent *elderscapes*" (2009: xxiii). He also notes that "elderscapes" in particular serve as "Landscapes for Aging" where the elderly carry out active social lives, and refers to Steven Katz and Gene Cohen's contributions to the concept (Sokolovsky 2009: xxi see Cohen specifically for "Landscapes for Aging"). Incorporating Cohen's work means exploring creativity's role in a "healthy" aging process (see Ewald 2005 on Cohen). Katz looks at "elderscapes" through "topographies" of aging and concentrates on retirement communities as "social worlds" (2009:463,465). The current work takes a look at these conceptions with an eye towards resiliency.

Reviewing the emerging trends and future directions for resiliency within studies on aging, Perkins notes that there is interest in the field to extend conceptualization of resiliency to:

> …related constructs, such as successful aging, which takes into account issues of dependency, physical decline, challenges related to chronic illness, and older adults' differing social locations (their place in society, defined by factors such as age, race, class, and sexual orientation) (Perkins 2014:138).

Reasons for doing this, include debunking that "resilience capacity decreases with old age" which she underscores scholars such as Fry and Keyes point to as a "myth" (Perkins 2014:138) She further notes that resiliency in aging was often treated as a fixed "personality trait" but that

[39] As an experience and strategy networks of relationships in Bulgaria offer reciprocity, social and economic ties, and add to "social capital."

the field has now recognized that resilience is "not static" (Perkins 2014:138-139 noting Fry and Keyes 2010). Instead, resilience involves recognition:

> …as a temporal, multidimensional, and multilevel process that may vary across multiple domains (e.g., social competency vs spiritual strength) and be influenced by factors at multiple ecological levels (i.e., individual level, social network level, local community level, and larger societal level) (Perkins 2014:139).

As part of a multidimensional process, studies on resiliency are no longer being confined to aging individuals' psychological or physiological states. Instead, they are being seen through approaches on ecology, relational perspectives comparable to Vesperi's (1998) use of "recognition" or "reciprocity," explorations of innovations and technology, and even with racial and cultural variations of resiliency (Perkins 2014:139-140; Manning 2015; see discussion on "reciprocity" in Vesperi 1998 in Chapter 1). Perkins (2014) also notes that the last category particularly needs further exploration. Manning (2015) stresses the importance of looking at resiliency in aging against "adversity" and while keeping human connections in mind. And finally, scholars such as Randall (2013) note that resiliency in aging means that elders are not just getting old; they are growing old as part of a resilient processes that is still alive and moving forward (Randall 2013:19 referring to Hengudomsub 2007 on moving forward).

The following chapters in this work contribute to furthering these suggestions on resiliency. They show that elders' strategies (such as negotiating belonging among peers and coping through shared experiences), spaces (such as pensioners' clubs and coffee-times), and innovations were those that sustained and adapted elders' peer, neighbor or friendship, and family networks for "well-being" in resilient ways.

CHAPTER 3

Methods and Field Sites: A Northwestern Village and a Southern Town

"One of my sons lives in [The Southern Town]. He has a family. My other son lives in their own house here, my third son currently lives in [another village] with his grandmother and grandfather, they are the parents of my daughter-in-law. There, in [another village], my son works in the mines. My fourth child is a daughter. She lives in [The Southern Town]. She is married there." – An Uncle in the Small Village near to the Southern Town

During my field work in the south of Bulgaria, people often told me about an ethos of "help." Everywhere I went in the Rhodope mountain region, for example, people noted that they got by with various acts of help – "*pomogna."* And just as a friend and mentor explained to me with funerals where women in the region would surely help those in need, or hospitality being part of regional values, this help could be considered a part of "old humanity" or tradition (see Chapter 1). This same ethos provided assistance to field work and methodology.

"Old humanity," offers from women folk, and hospitality were alive and well as I entered the Rhodopes. They coached themselves under an umbrella of "help" – something which was upheld through sustained interpersonal relationships. My first bus trip in the region, for example, began with a woman motioning to me to sit by her in our small white van which sped through the hilly road. She had been traveling to the next major city to visit a hospital, and her curiosity must have been piqued at the foreigner in the bus who was talking on her cell phone to a "gatekeeper" about to meet her in the Southern Town. She realized where I was going, and then began a flurry of conversation that included invitations for visits. A grandmother wearing a pink flowered head scarf and sporting a long black braid joined our conversation. A traveling student told me of her husband who was away in London where he worked in construction. The first woman I met told me of her ailments. Everyone on the bus had a story to tell, and everyone asked about my own. In that tight space and short time, a convivial traveling group had developed.

The ride progressed with the group showing me places to see along the road and continuing dialogue. The grandmother suggested that I visit her village if I wanted to know how they lived there and added that people sometimes took tourists into their homes (something that my Bulgarian friends suggested might happen when visiting the mountain regions). She also questioned me time and again about how my own mother might feel with me being so far away. The question was almost rhetorical as she recounted how she too had family abroad. All agreed that people had left the area to search for opportunity, schooling, or work. However, that grandmother noted that there were still people living in her village. She joked that if I wasn't married she had a grandson I could meet.

As the bus approached my stop, the conversation turned to tasks. The first lady I met directed me where I was to get off the bus, alerted the driver where he should best leave me, and waited with me until my ride arrived. She asked if I was scared to be in a new place. Was I scared to meet new people? And just in case I was scared, she would remain there until I was safely on my way. That initial entry into the Rhodopes introduced me to an "ethos" not only of helping people within the region, as my friend from the Southern Town claimed, but also of the importance of help at a cultural level. I would soon learn how that ethos and its effects would influence my own life and experiences far away from home.[40]

[40] In December 2012, my father called me from the United States. He was in the back of an ambulance with my mother who had suffered a stroke and was being taken to the emergency ward for severe patients. My mother was only 67 and some years into retirement. My father was 73 years old.

During fieldwork, I recall that some Bulgarian grandmothers would ask me how my mother must feel with her daughter being so far away. When the stroke happened, I felt helpless and wondered what I could do to help my parents from Bulgaria. It would be over 24 hours to reach them and would take a 6 hours' bus ride through the mountains in snow, a stay in the capital until the next flight out of the country, layovers, and an almost two hour commute once in San Francisco to my own home town. It also took 2 months away from the field and had lasting consequences to my tiny three-person family.

When I returned to Bulgaria, I personally learned the meaning and understood the importance of culturally valued interpersonal relationships, particularly concerning friends and families. Networks of friends I had made in the field rallied to help me and sustained support after the event, past the point of my own recovery, and beyond my time in the field.

Pomogna (To Help) – Part of Life and Method

The bus ride into the Rhodopes was not the first time I had encountered offers and people taking on helpful responsibilities. I had seen it before, especially on small mini-van buses transporting people from village to village so that families and friends could come together across distances. Often it was more than people that bus drivers carried. They would also transport food, care packages, or even what looked like documents for people they knew or agreed to assist. In the south, people did not shy away from asking for help, small or large, and then reciprocating when possible. On a bus ride from the Southern Town where I was staying to the nearest city, a woman asked me to watch over her laptop during a break so that she could go to the restroom. When she came back and asked where I was going, she found out that the bus I was on didn't stop *in* the city but outside of it and she made sure that the bus driver, others, and I knew how to get me where I was going. "We try to help," she said to me after determining that directions were set on their course.

Many times during my travels and studies in southern Bulgaria, I heard stories about how people as a whole try to help each other. As in the above case, the qualifier "we" often got tagged on to these statements, placing an emphasis on a collective and implying a cultural theme. When informally encountering people, such as in a bus, the "we" often referred to helping as a member of a region or nation. This was also true when formally talking with the elderly. Depending on the question, the responding "we" could also be linked to membership in a home community or to others their age – "we" as Balkan or as "old people."

"*Pomogna*" also came in many forms. In the above example, it was a stranger reciprocating for making sure her laptop was safe while she used a restroom. For the elderly in my research, it came in the form of exchanging company or food. The help offered to me in my research came in

the form of individuals who assisted me with access to the field and "adopted" me into their fold; who included me in activities and assisted with interviews; and whose contributions, experiences, and daily lives pepper field notes.

Help Accessing the Field and Multiple Researcher Roles

Describing the "emotional context" of her fieldwork as she navigated identities first as a married woman, then as a widow, and finally as an eligible single, Diane Freedman (1986) recounted how varied roles as a female anthropologist led to different site experiences in the Romanian village where she lived and worked. She also noted that a tripartite identity helped highlight her own perceptions of and relationships with villagers (and vice-versa) and the influence on data from those relationships (Freedman 1986:355-356). During her first year of research, for example, Freedman was accompanied by her husband whose presence shared and validated frustrations, solidified villagers' interactions with her as a married woman, and helped her understand gender customs and divisions (337-339). Because of illness and her husband's death, Freedman's second year in the field was one that required a 'reincorporated' entry into the village; shifting experience and identity with mourning; evolved, empathetic, and often "sought" for contact and companionship; and navigating villagers' concerns about acceptable and understood behavior for a single woman as well as for her future marriage opportunities (349-355).

My fieldwork also included three varying experiences regarding field sites and access, changing researcher roles, and expectations. The first experience involved entry into exploratory research in the Northwestern Village and through personal connections. The second experience involved transitioning from connections in the northern area of the country to academic ones who helped my entry into a Southern Town in the Rhodopes. Finally, the third experience incorporated the interactions, contacts, and understanding that surrounded a situation akin to mourning in the

field – my mother suffering a debilitating stroke while I was away. That situation resulted in networks of people offering salient support and sympathy not only to me as a researcher but also as someone they saw as "theirs." All of these experiences led to shifting identities as a researcher and to who I was to the people offering help.

The Northwestern Village[41]

While the majority of field work occurred during the 2012 and 2013 academic year and in the Rhodopes, exploratory research preceded this time and happened in a large town and small village[42] (the Northwestern Village) near to the Serbian border (see **Appendix D** for a map).[43] Access into the field came through personal connections and networks. Stories about struggles that some elderly had been experiencing in a depopulating village first drew me to the field (see chapter 1). I had been told that, as it was a closed Vlach community, one of the first questions people customarily asked to strangers they met were, "Whose are you?" The implication was that personal networks allowed access and were vital chains for establishing relationships.

Population and Movement in the Northwestern Village

[41] I refer to the two main field sites in this study as the "Northwestern Village" and the "Southern Town." Many of the people who lived in these places represented groups who had undergone personal name changes as part of socialist policy and nationalization efforts. They were keenly aware that they had two names and sometimes would remark on it. At times, they distinguished between given and passport names. They may have told me that they changed their name out of choice. Or, they might have mentioned their birth name indicating that they could do so in the current times. For anonymity, or confidentiality, I use general terms (such as a small village or hamlet) and primarily kinship terms.

[42] For anonymity's purpose but to also respect territorial designations as much as possible, I refer to settlements as village (*selo*) or town (*grad*). This follows official specifications and definitions for settlements in the country (see Territorial Administration of the Republic of Bulgaria Act 2011: Article 3). However, in Bulgarian language "*grad*" means both town and city. I choose to primarily refer to towns and their size, acknowledging that larger entities can also be cities. For more on cities, 'large towns,' and 'small towns,' see the entry for Bulgaria in the Wikipedia (2017) article "Town" (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Town#Bulgaria).

[43] Parts of this section concerning the Northwestern Village appear or have been adapted from an earlier paper and write-up of exploratory work. The title of that paper is "Narrating and Strategizing Things and Time: Tales from a Declining Village in Northwest Bulgaria" (Le Fevre 2009a. [unpublished]). Contextual and historical information on the Northwestern Village from that paper also appear in the next chapter.

When I first visited the Northwestern Village in 2008, it had a population registered at 63 people with permanent addresses and 91 people with mailing addresses (Main Directory of Civil Registration and Administrative Services). Data from Bulgaria's National Statistical Institute (NSI) reports 92 people in the Northwestern Village during 2008 (Republic of Bulgaria National Register of Populated Places).[44] In 2010, villagers noted that only about 50 people remained in the village, although official data reports that there were 89 (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute Register of Populated Places). The last data reported for 2014 shows an alarming population drop of 54 villagers. As Table 2 shows, these numbers are part of a downward trend for the Northwestern Village. It is also in final stages of demographic crises (see Mladenov et. al 2008 for stages).

Table 2. Population for Northwestern Village and Pertinent Locations (Census years highlighted)

Village or Town	1934	1946	1956	1965	1975	1985	1995	2000	2005	2008	2010	2011
The Northwestern Village	627	596	533	405	316	227	177	155	96	92	89	67 and* 65
Large Town	18740	18759	24170	37128	53529	62484	63560	59399	52558	50185	48859	48071 and 47382

Source data: Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute, National Register of Populated Places (formatted and organized by author)
Note: The Northwestern Village's population was 59 (2012/13) and 54 (2014)
*Includes census data and other data reported if provided and different from the Census.

Movement in the Northwestern Village, has occurred both across local borders and out to countries far and wide. Located on a hilly plane near the Serbian border and the Balkan range, and in one of the most impoverished areas of Bulgaria, inhabitants noted that families and households

[44] To respect confidentiality, some data and sources have been de-identified here and throughout the work. Some names of villages or towns have also been omitted in other references.

stretched across geographical barriers throughout various times. This stretching occurred during political changes to borders during the Balkan Wars or when they were closed during the socialist times. Then the borders were delineated with barbed wire, but that wire was eventually co-opted and used by villagers when taken down after the "fall of communism" in 1989.

Before the "fall of communism" Bulgarian ethnographer Dimitar Marinov (1984) published a volume devoted to populations in and around the Northwestern Village. He estimated that the Northwestern Village had 609 people at a certain time. Data from the National Statistical Institute closely corroborates this for 1934. He also documented a list of family names for the village. This included 18 family clans with 10 to 19 family members each. Historians on the Balkans often refer to these family organizations as Balkan "*zadruga*" strongholds (Valtchinova 2006; Creed 1998).

Current family members either in the Northwestern Village or visiting it, remember large three-generational households. They bemoan that those households are gone today. However, as a grandson visiting the village said during a walk one day, vestiges of family clans still exist:

> [W]ell there are a few clans here and from centuries back there is some kind of envy, hatred and so on … and they make up some … they always do some kind of mischief …they haven't come to the point to beat each other to bleeding but I don't know why is that, this is something instilled from centuries ago…well yes, it is from centuries ago.

The narrative was interesting not so much because it established that century-long family ties were still present in the Northwestern Village despite the absence of many family members, but because the elderly were depicted as still engaging in and creating "melodramatic" and "passionate" lives (see Myerhoff 1980:7 on passionate and melodramatic life). Moreover, they engaged in ways that both endured time and relationships with people (through feuding and cross-cutting ties) and adapted as still living and still moving forward with "mischief."

Finally, someone noted that the list of family names on Marinov's register was a mix of Serbian, Latin, Turkish, and Bulgarian names. My translator, who became an assistant and friend during early fieldwork in the Northwestern Village and whose role will be discussed further in the chapter, remarked that Marinov's book had been examining linguistic and ethnic mixing in the region, which is not surprising given the country's history (see Chapter 4). Today, however, the Northwestern Village primarily consists of a Vlach, or "Romanian" speaking minority[45] group. And although the village had been open to cross marriages with ethnic "Bulgarians" from neighboring villages thus extending families, networks, and wealth, the villagers referred to it as a Vlach village first and foremost.

A Vlach Village

While inhabitants in the Northwestern Village identified as Vlach, many did not know why or how the village came to be that way. They did know that shepherding had been part of the village economy and practice for as long as they could remember and before socialist times. When I asked a shepherdess I knew from the Northwestern Village if the people there had always been shepherds, and she replied that they had. *"*Well yes*,"* she said, "oooh since the village is here we have always been shepherds." When I asked her where she knew or thought the Vlachs came from she answered, "... I don't know my girl, I don't know, it was long ago, long ago."

Villagers in the Northwestern Village had many explanations on what it meant to be Vlach versus Bulgarian, although it is important to note that they are also Bulgarian. Differences villagers noted included variations in traditional dress, in wedding and funeral rites (see Grebenarova 1998),

[45] Some people take issue with the use of the term "minority" to describe group status within Bulgaria. Here and throughout the work it refers to people's conceptions of ethnic and national identities or cultural practices (e.g. differences in mother-tongue or religious affiliation from the majority of the Bulgarian population). Throughout Bulgarian history, these groups have been referenced, viewed, and treated differently depending on a variety of factors such as political or territorial. The current Bulgarian constitution does not use the term "minority" and allows for cultural, national, and ethnic freedoms (Republic of Bulgaria Council of Ministers 2005 Constitution of the Republic of Bulgaria).

and with stereotypes of shepherds being "shaggy" or with Vlachs being "rich" because they were a frugal group. Most importantly, they highlighted that they spoke a dialect close to Romanian but that wasn't exactly the same. The Shepherdess remarked that it was a "messed-up" type. She said those speaking real "*Vlashki"*[46] lived in Romania.

One woman, a villager's daughter who was visiting one weekend, shed more light and complexity on the subject, and added that borders mattered.

> **Neighbor's Daughter (from the northwest):** They categorize us/count us as Romania… more and when they do research and they say Vlasite [Vlachs] here [in] this area and this region is counted part of Romania [*laughs*] and we are in Bulgaria.
> …
> **Lisa:** … did they do that… did the people do that or who's they?
> **Neighbor's Daughter**: The foreigners who come, in general, and when they hear Vlashki they … they define us as Romania … they don't know the borders at all.

As Chapter 4 will explain in more detail, linking borders to problems of identity in the Balkans is significant. In this case, the narrative highlights how linguistic borders and categories that outsiders create can confuse and restrict identities. They can also impose on and negate people's personal experiences and realities.

Scholars note that the term "Vlach" has many names and connotations in the Balkans, and could be often used in derogatory or stereotypical ways to refer to shepherd communities (Campbell 1964 on Greek Vlachs; Winnifrith 1987 on Koustovlachs in Romania; Lambros Comitas personal communication March 25, 2008). These populations have traditionally been viewed as transhumant shepherds who migrated between summer and winter pastures, although scholars also note that there were variations in migratory patterns and even with settlements (Campbell 1964; Chang 1993 on migration zones and transhumance; Crabtree 2006 on agropastoralism; Schein 1975 for Arumani; Wace and Thompson 1914; Winnifrith 1987).

[46] The language or dialect spoken by the Vlachs in the area.

Villagers in the Northwestern Village, however, did not remember traveling between summer and winter pastures. They said that it was the Karakachani,[47] another shepherd group located in southern Bulgaria, who did that. When talking about this group, villagers firmly distinguished themselves from the Karakachani, but they did respect some of their practices. Instead, villagers in the Northwestern Village practiced both agriculture and local pastoralism. They farmed wheat, corn, oats, vegetable gardens, and vineyards and some grazed approximately 58 sheep around the village's fields. Scholars have noted that these types of practices are indicative of settled Vlachs (see Chang 1993; Schein 1975; and Winnifrith 1987). It is important to note, however, that these practices are not the main source of people's income. That comes from pensions paid out from former occupations as, for example, miners.[48]

Concerning language, many villagers within the Northwestern Village were bilingual and able to speak both "Vlashki" and Bulgarian. Some noted that their "Vlashki" is a "messed-up" version of Romanian,[49] but all speaking it as a first language noted that it is their maternal tongue. Villagers learned it from their grandparents as the language was passed down between generations (see also Antonov 1995:128; or Vaseva 1995:103 on Vlashki; Winnifrith 1987). The very old in the Northwestern Village (above 80 years) might never have formally learned much Bulgarian, and some people mentioned having to spend a year of language integration as children to learn Bulgarian before going on to school. These villagers' children and grandchildren grew up learning Bulgarian, and elders note that today while some grandchildren understand Vlach language it is disappearing among the very young who are far and away.

[47] The Karakachani are also known as Sarakatsani in Greece (See Campbell 1964).
[48] People noted that miners received high pensions. In 2008, people told me that there were only a few people left in the Northwestern Village who received miners' pension amounts. Chapter 6 explores the relationship between pensions and occupations.
[49] Vaseva (1995:104) also document that Vlach populations in her study referred to their language as "mixed-up." Depending on the nuance, the "messed-up" comments within my transcriptions could also be translated as "mixed-up."

A Village's Heyday

Just as inhabitants did not know how their village came to be Vlach, they also did not know when their village had been founded. The earliest records I could find about the Northwestern Village consisted of a one paragraph description from the early 1900s simply noting that it existed in a crude form, with adobe houses, and without much description:

> The [Northwestern Village] – 5 kilometers from the county, 15 kilometers from [Village X]. The houses are from "*plet*,"[50] they are grouped, they have big yards (2-3 decares) they are surrounded by "*plet*" and stone walls. The inhabitants are doing agriculture. They sow wheat and corn. There is a primary school, credit cooperation, "*chitalishte*."[51] It requires planning (The Bulgarian Village 1930).[52]

What villagers tended to remember was that from the 1950s to the 1970s the village had flourished under socialist times. It was then that once occupational shepherds traveled long distances to work in lucrative professions as miners. When asked how this happened, since Vlach communities in the Balkans traditionally existed from transhumant shepherding, I was told that it snowballed from men in families who learned that the job was more favorable at the time.

This snowballing, while lucrative and favorable at first, began a movement out of the village where people left in droves. During the 1970s many villagers left either permanently or temporarily for work in the mining industry and to a factory around the town (see also Creed 1998). Part of the socialist state's values, industrialization was promoted and served as a forward march for people away from rural environments and towards cities. Those who left temporarily, however, frequently traveled home (sometimes weekly). They built on their family houses and aspired to develop their native landscape to better provide for their parents living there, their own children

[50] "Plet" is a type of sod made out of mud into clay. It is like adobe. I was told that villagers used to mix it with grasses and apply it over wood beams that were thatched or woven into frames. When these dried, they became walls that protected people from the elements, were warm in the winter, and cool in the summer.
[51] Dating from the 19th century, the "*chitalishte*" is a cultural resource center found in villages and towns. See Kaneff (2006) for an explanation on the importance of this building under socialism.
[52] Translation of this text was provided with outside help.

who they saw as the village's heirs, and for their eventual plans to return or retire to the village as "home."

Today, migration pushes the village's heirs to major Bulgarian cities and foreign countries for work, with some saying younger generations no longer return to the place for their ultimate home. As a result, the village population declined nearly 28 percent from 1975 to 1985, and approximately 15 percent more by 1992 (Bizeranova 1995). With so few permanent addresses in the village in 2008, one could say that out-migration has nearly reached a final end for the villagers. It's also no wonder that villagers might ask who a stranger belongs to should he or she visit, because being part of a family there would establish a lineage to it and a right to be vested in its and its people's experiences.

One of "Ours" in the Northwestern Village

Personal relationships at the time laid a foundation for people's willingness (or lack thereof in some cases) to talk to me, and helped me and a research assistant (who accompanied me into the field for translation purposes) in our work. A local from the town, who did not identify as Vlach, my assistant, had also been accepted and seen as a vital helper both to myself and others. We shared time and spaces of work and rest together, carving out a place of our own momentarily within the Northwestern Village.

Our place there became apparent during a mini-van bus trip returning to the Northwestern Village after having visited a larger settlement that served as an administrative hub for several communities. The bus had been full with every seat taken, making our standing on the winding trip over dirt roads a daunting adventure. However, a grandmother we had met and known well from the Northwestern Village was also on the bus. She insisted that we rest, that room could be made, and pulled me on to her lap. As people chatted and spoke to us, with one woman vying for

my attention, the grandmother made it known where our identities (and possibly fidelities) lay. Taking ownership for us and on behalf of the Northwestern Village, she announced to others that we were theirs – or "ours."

Being co-opted as "ours" is an experience anthropologists have noted, in much the same way that they too adopt places (villages, communities, etc.) as theirs. Ownership, as scholars such as Kaneff (2006) and Briggs (1986) note, can afford access but is also fraught with complexities. For Kaneff, fieldwork in Bulgaria allowed her a role as "nasheto momiche" – "our girl" – because of family connections as well as "endearment" (2006:24). In "Kapluna Daughter," Briggs (1986) recognized that while protected and accepted as part of an Inuit family, relationships were strained between personal research aims and temperament, and those that community and a family expected of her. In both cases, as with my own, field work was enriched through these connections.

The Southern Town

The majority of my field experience took place in the south of Bulgaria where help and access were afforded to "our American" (see **Appendix D** for a map). In describing her experiences, Freedman also noted that research traditions affected researcher roles and aims, and in Eastern Europe "long-term field work focusing on broad ethnographic goals is not an Eastern European academic tradition" (1986:338). In this instance, Freedman's discussion revolved around the challenge between local research and academic interests, and her desire to be in a village in the field.

My own work required me to strike a balance between being in towns and villages, participating in daily life, and interviewing. Relocating work to the south, my role had changed from personal connections to scholarly ones with my in-group becoming the network of academics

in the field linked by a Fulbright[53] grant. Still, these interests were not void of personal connections since this metaphorical family of academics often included friends and their connections.

My entry into fulltime field work and research, then, was greatly aided with support and funding from the Fulbright Bulgarian American Commission for Educational Exchange. Awarded 10 months funding with the program, the Fulbright offices and staff took care to help with transitions and initial contacts such as with a week of continued language training,[54] building comradery among researchers and other grantees for support, and most importantly serving as a liaison with a Bulgarian academic institution and its scholars at the Institute for Population and Human Studies. The contacts and help I received consisted of collegiality; access to books and resources; and the assistance, advice, and understanding of one scholar in particular and her outreach to both professional and personal networks.

A senior research associate, her reach and support included access to articles and participation in a conference where I could learn how scholars in the field were discussing issues and research agendas to include various types of quantitative and qualitative methodologies. It also extended to other professionals and acquaintances such as to a professor in the field who she thought might be of help. Trying to think of a suitable field site in the south that may have access to smaller villages but at the same time have a small town nearby, she called a colleague, who after speaking with me, was willing to assist. He would serve as a gatekeeper (or Guide in the south) and supportive mentor who would help me during my time in Bulgaria, in the field, and with communication.

[53] I am thankful for having received a Fulbright grant. The views and information presented in this dissertation are my own and do not represent the Fulbright program or the Department of State.

[54] Because of personal connections for practice, exposure from prior visits to Bulgaria, and a summer language training grant awarded in 2010 from The American Council of Learned Societies, I had intermediate language skills going into my Fulbright experience and research in Bulgaria. The Commission arranged a week of workshops and classes for grantees concerning Bulgarian language, history, and culture. Those classes served as refresher courses from which I benefited.

Populations and Movement in and around the Southern Town

The Southern Town I stayed in was located in the Rhodope Mountains and bordered near to Greece. It was also close to Turkey and had diverse populations spanning around 7,000 people in the town, to around a few hundred to a few thousand people in surrounding villages. During the time that I was there in 2012 and 2013, the Southern Town's population was documented at 7,003 and at 6,867 people (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute National Register of Populated Places). Surrounding villages that I visited (as a guest, with people who traveled weekly between them, to conduct interviews, or to participate in events) included two large villages with populations at 2,212 and 1,268 in 2013 (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute National Register of Populated Places). I also visited a small village and a hamlet with populations documented at 274 and 65 people in 2013 (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute National Register of Populated Places).

Table 3 shows that populations in the Southern Town and surrounding areas have undergone a downward trend since 2000, with many people noting that the inhabitants go abroad for work in Greece, Turkey, and to other countries. This movement can also be linked to time-frames coinciding with Bulgarians' gaining visa-free entrance into the Schengen Zone and with European Union membership.

Table 3. Population for Southern Town and Pertinent Locations (Census years highlighted)

Village or Town	1934	1946	1956	1965	1975	1985	1995	2000	2005	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
The Southern Town	3431	4182	4508	6510	7724	8748	8779	8444	7383	7007	7183 and* 7116	7003	6867	6715
Small Village near to the Southern Town	266	334	367	515	551	476	393	394	376	317	286	280	274	252
Hamlet	206	265	252	324	306	210	146	138	91	78	70	70	65	62
Large Village 1	1168	1296	1698	2148	2523	2775	2725	2690	2600	2305	2301 And 2286	2272	2212	2165
Large Village 2	457	594	687	895	1044	1271	1398	1418	1237	1198	1312	1295	1268	1233

Source data: Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute, National Register of Populated Places (formatted and organized by author).
*Includes census data and other data reported if provided and different from the Census.

Scholars have also noted that one of the largest migrations in Bulgaria occurred nearby at the Turkish border in 1989 with the mass emigration of the country's Turkish populations (see for example Mladenov et al. 2008). Part of what was seen by some as a human rights issue (see discussion for example in Elchinova 2011), the Communist regime under Todor Zhivkov issued an assimilation campaign ("'Revival process'" or "'regenerative process'") for the ethnic Turkish within Bulgaria from 1984-1989 (Elchinova 2011; see Crampton 2005:205 on "'regenerative process'"). A large part of this campaign involved name changes, a policy that had occurred with the Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks)[55] in the area during the 1970s, but which wasn't successful in this attempt during the late 80s (Crampton 2005:204). It also involved repressive measures to Turkish language, media, and businesses. Rather than changing their names populations resisted and clashes ensued in areas. Hundreds of thousands of ethnic Turks eventually left in an exodus

[55] In the Northwestern Village, I also noted instances where Vlachs had two names. This was often referred to as a passport name and then there was a birth name.

with media reports of expulsion or encouragement to leave based on "religious repression" (Haberman 1989). Between June and August 1989, some 320,000 – 369,839 ethnic Turks had left the country (Elchinova 2011). This was among one of the events, scholars such as Crampton (2005:204) note, to contribute to the Bulgarian Communist regime's demise in November or 1989.

Despite this emigration, scholars today note that some ethnic Turks returned to Bulgaria (mostly elderly) although difficulties remained:

> This short-term emigration brought to significant losses of fertile contingents in most of the "Turkish" municipalities in Bulgaria and this resulted in lowering their birth rates in the following period up till today – something which did not happen in the Pomak populated areas, which have now (together with the Gypsies) the highest natural increase and the youngest age structure (Mladenov et al. 2008:121).

Concerning the Pomak populations, the authors note that four regions in the country have been able to maintain populations because of the Muslim population's lower migration, higher fertility, and engagement in profitable (although difficult) agricultural lifestyles (tobacco growing) (Mladenov et al. 2008).

Pomaks (Bulgarian Muslims)

The Southern Town is in one of the Rhodope areas where Pomak (Bulgarian Muslim) populations primarily reside.[56] Located in Southern-central Bulgaria, the area is in what scholars such as Mladenov et al. (2008) would map as undergoing initial and intermediate phases of demographic crises. The town itself is a mixed population of both Orthodox Christians and Bulgarian Muslims. People would often tell me that the two groups lived like "brothers and sisters." The area has a small textile and garment industry, was formerly and traditionally an agricultural based economy from growing tobacco, once had a booming mining industry,[57] and

[56] Scholars remark that Bulgarian Muslim populations are concentrated in the Rhodopes particularly in the southwestern region and Greek northern Thrace (Frusetta 2011).

[57] Some people still grow and trade tobacco in the area, though they mention that doing so is not very lucrative. Some mining activity also still exists.

currently has a cultural and eco-tourism industry. The surrounding villages I visited, were all "*Pomak."*

"*Pomak*" was a term that people in the region did not usually like to use. Instead, they mentioned that they were Bulgarian Muslim. The group's history could be seen as a contentious one, and scholars note that they are often considered as ethnic Bulgarians who underwent conversion processes during the Ottoman Empire, sometimes forcibly and sometimes by choice (Crampton 2005). They also note that while this conversion brought some into Islam and Turkey's fold, others remained true to "Bulgarian language, traditions, and costumes" (Crampton 2005:35).

Much later under the Communist regime, Bulgarian Muslims underwent nationalist efforts involving assimilation and modernization campaigns. During this time (particularly in the 1970s), propaganda promoting changes to Islamic names and practices, and under the guise of "progress", began in the country (see examples in Ghodsee 2010:49-55). People were coaxed out of wearing Turkish attire and symbolically religious clothing for the sake of "modernity," and "imposed ethnicity" with Slavic names (Frusetta 2011; Ghodsee 2010). The name changes were so pervasive that, as Ghodsee notes, "With the total efficiency that only a centralized state can exercise, all traces of Turko-Arabic nomenclature were removed from the physical and administrative space of the country" (2010:51).

I traveled in the remnants of this space during my time in Bulgaria and in areas around the Southern Town. Some elders would offer me their Islamic names. One elderly woman I met on a bus, for example, told me first what her Slavic/Christian name was when she introduced herself. She then declared that she could now use her actual name, and told me what it was. She watched me as I wrote notes, and she looked proud. In another instance, a 93-year-old great-grandfather who was celebrating his wife's death anniversary, recounted stories to me. In one of those, he

mentioned how his wife had two names – one which was Turkish and the other Bulgarian which she chose.

After the fall of communism, people could apply to reinstate family names, a practice that Ghodsee (2010:34-35) noted many decided to forgo to avoid anti-Turkish discrimination and keep employment opportunities open. This later posed problems for some people at death when both priests and imams refused to bury Muslims with Christian names (Ghodsee 2010:34-35). In choosing to change, use, or talk about names the elderly woman and great-grandfather I met were reclaiming identities. They were also exhibiting resiliency and agency. Not wishing to impose further name changes on the elderly in this work, I've chosen to refer to my interlocuters by variations of age-appropriate kinship terms such as grandfather ("*diado"*), grandmother ("*baba"*), aunt ("*lelia"*), or uncle ("*chicho"*).[58] This is a common practice respected in Bulgaria, and which I use to maintain confidentiality while respecting some elderly's agency and reclamation of identities.

Mining Days

While agriculture and tobacco were traditionally practiced in the Rhodope area I was in, elderly in the Southern Town and villagers around it had lived through experiences of great growth and wealth from the mining industry. Mining in Bulgaria had been around since the Roman's time, and the region (not yet country) was known for producing rich and precious metal ores such as copper, gold, platinum and other resources (Encyclopedia of the Nations 2017).

Under socialism, the mining industry flourished across the country. Many villagers in the south, such as those in the Northwestern Village, left agriculture for work in mines which was

[58] I referred to Kaneff's 2006 work and adopted her glossary for the transliterations of kinship terms. Kaneff (2006) used the Library of Congress transliteration scheme from 1997, and the ALA-LC Romanization tables for Bulgarian were consistent as of their last update in 2013 (The Library of Congress 2013, Kaneff 2006 see glossary page). Another way to translate/spell grandfather and aunt are "*dyado*" and "*leyla*."

profitable (securing them better pensions if they lived through the occupation's hazards) and well respected as part of national, communist efforts towards industrialization. The Southern Town was a big producer of lead-zinc ore, and many of the miners belonged to the national GORUBSO Company.

As Ghodsee (2010) notes, GORUBSO effected everyone's lives in the region. "Everyone in the city or the villages around it had been affected by the meteoric rise," she writes, "or the convoluted and prolonged death of communist Bulgaria's nonferrous metals powerhouse" (Ghodsee 2010:56). GORUBSO represented the Socialist ideology (Marxist-Leninism), commitments to industrialization, masculinity, and created work for both men (although mostly men) and women (Ghodsee 2010:57-62).

After the fall of the Bulgarian Communist regime, mines had either been closed or privatized. GORUBSO was privatized and some of its areas were closed or redistributed. Miners lost work, areas that had been new mining towns in the 1950s declined, and depression ensued. This created a mass decline in work opportunities and impoverishment. It also created a divide in the standard of living for retirees on pensions. Those that had been miners in both regions had wealthy pensions while others didn't or fell short of receiving pensions because they didn't have enough working years across their working lives.

While the mining industry still exists in the area, but to a lesser extent than in the past, many families have left the area or gone abroad in search of work. However, as Chapter 8 explores, there were times when family members of all ages and living in various distances came and went, and where reliance on the benefits of interpersonal relationships spanned time, space, and strategies.

"Our American" in the Southern Town

The benefits of interpersonal relationships were not only extended to villagers and town dwellers, but also to me as an anthropologist. Many friends and their families offered and provided much care and needed respite, opening their homes to me when I was in need. In the Southern Town, this included many town folks such as academics, writers, those who worked in the media, local business families, merchants, students, neighbors, and all the elderly who spoke and spent time with me. In cities across Bulgaria and even abroad, friends whom I had cultivated and their families had long offered their support, homes, and help in all realms, from cultural understanding, to being with me in times of illness, to serving as advocates and a place for grounding. Also, all networks increased dramatically when people learned of my mother's debilitating stroke, and I witnessed extra efforts to make sure I wasn't mourning, spending time, or left alone.

Without all these networks and support, fieldwork would have been difficult to acquire on my own. Conducting fieldwork as an affiliated researcher served to vouch for my time, pursuits, and solidified, in the locals, a willingness to help a student interested to learn and conduct ethnography in their space as "our American."

Participant Observation in Everyday Life

Being incorporated as "our American" in the Southern Town or "ours" in the Northwestern Village entailed being welcomed into life in a participatory sense. Participation included invitations into people's homes and partaking in activities. With the elderly, this often meant having coffee and meals together, and socializing when friends or neighbors dropped-in or were already visiting. There were moments of working in gardens to collect fruits, vegetables and weeds, or working on field harvests to sort wheat and other grains for storing. Moments of canning and pickling played a part of late summer months, a time when conversation took long turns over filling dozens of jars. It also meant evening chats about issues portrayed on television and affecting

people's lives, commiserating over instances of feeling lonely or isolated, or sitting on wooden benches overlooking streets and watching those who may happen to pass nearby.[59]

Participant observation wasn't just relegated to life with target elderly populations, but it also occurred with those who contributed to the strong value and importance of sustaining interpersonal relationships. During these times, I participated in family celebrations like "*pomen*" (funeral anniversaries), or visited grandchildren in high schools to help with conversational English and writing. It involved knowing neighbors who watched for each other; talking to people charged with maintaining health or well-being for the elderly, and experiencing as much of the financial, social, and cultural contexts people lived in as possible. All of this, as Keith et al. (1994) noted with participant observation and other methods such as interviewing, helped with understanding detailed accounts and experiences of how the aging process worked and was constructed in different areas of Bulgaria.

As a long-term and ongoing process, the method also encouraged rapport and established a foundation for symbiotic relationships in the field. Through this symbiosis, the process allowed for collaboration and a chance to learn with and from the people with whom I spent time. It also allowed for quantitative and qualitative data collection which helped to find patterns in people's daily actions and narratives. Participation also meant that people came to know of me and sometimes sought me out to offer their assistance or snowball recommendations through networks for the next important tool used in the field – interviews and conversations.

Interviews and Conversations

In addition to participant observation, a hallmark of ethnography, the research heavily incorporated various levels of interviewing as another seminal method for addressing the research

[59] Benches, such as with those documented in Vesperi's (1998) work, are pivotal places for the elderly to gather in public spaces and allowed one to see, be seen, and socialize in villages.

agenda and questions. This allowed for additional moments of rapport, for a way of approaching sensitive subject matter, and for further collaboration between the researcher (Bernard 2006; Levy and Hollan 2000:333-364). A cross-disciplinary method (employed also in sociology, psychology, family studies, and journalism), Bernard (2006:211-212) organizes interviews per type and in stages, going from initial informal or unstructured interviews which uncover themes across respondents to arranging interviews for more semi-structured and formal techniques. In the beginning of the interviewing processes, for example, an informal approach to just strike up conversation helped me with the elderly as it gave individuals time to engage with me on their own terms and to establish control. It also allowed both parties to engage in meaningful conversation that lead to more formal assessment or interviewing, and a certain amount of agency for individuals to follow chosen themes and topics.[60]

My exploratory work with elders in villages in the north taught me that people often felt alone and loved to talk, but that keeping to a structured guide was challenging. Work and tasks to be done, lapses of memory, informal arguments, and wandering trains of thought often interrupted interviews despite the direction a structured method was meant to provide. Occasions and setting for informal interviewing varied. Walking by a person sitting on a bench, in front of a house, or working in a field frequently resulted in my being called over to chat. At times, people would call upon me to formally visit them or come over for coffee and sweets. On those instances, a table would normally be set up, formalities such as offering cookies or chocolates would be exchanged, and then I would be asked what I wanted to know. At other times, especially when interviews

[60] Agency for conducting interviews was sometimes taken over for me to initiate contacts and offer, once again, help. It especially happened in the form of "friends helping friends" as a close contact of mine in the field noted one day. Arranging her assistance as much as she could, she would coach me on introductions and noted how important those were as entry points. Her tapping into her own friends to look for suitable interviews or friends of their friends further codified processes that were anything but disengaging from social life.

happened in outdoor spaces, multiple individuals would gather to create ad-hoc focus groups where friends and neighbors wanted to join in for conversation, fun, or out of pure curiosity. Those moments also brought an aura of conviviality, and socialization, and created instances where I could witness cultural values placed on networks of help and interpersonal relationships.

Finally, the length of time spent on interviews depended on circumstances and a person's willingness and desire to help me learn about a lesson they wanted to impart (e.g, how to cook a local pastry dish or grasp a story's moral). Very few people declined interviews, and when they did they often were apologetic or tried to find me other contacts with whom to speak. Most of the time, people wanted to spend as much time as possible talking, often over coffee or a home-cooked meal. This meant that I had multiple cups of coffee with elderly who normally expected rounds of visits and who were always willing to pour more caffeine.

Documentation

Finally, the research is informed by documentation that is in part based on evidence and archives; and, to a much larger degree, based on the participant observations and interviews captured in transcripts and field notes. Briefly, the first category involved the help of scholars inviting me to access studies and articles conducted by Bulgarian institutions; current demographic and statistical data from international reports such as with the World Bank; or historical descriptions and ledgers about village life found in libraries or community repositories. These are in addition to the literature and theory with which the work engages, and offer historical or contextual background on economic, political, and social data.

Interviews also became documentation. As previously mentioned, a translator assisted with exploratory work in the Northwestern Village. Not only did she help me during conversations with the elderly, but she also transcribed and translated interviews both in Bulgarian and English. She

captured people's narratives in text; marked inconsistencies and unintelligible moments such as people interrupting or speaking over each other; and offered her interpretations. Except for small grammatical changes and "cleaning," her translations have been included in the dissertation mostly verbatim when possible to capture some of these nuances.[61] In and around the Southern Town, I received help from various people with transcriptions and translations. This included a friend and assistant who documented the Bulgarian for some interviews, and friends who crossed-read translations chosen for this dissertation to verify meaning.[62]

Ultimately, field notes and their write-up provide the core of this dissertation's narratives and material for analysis or evidence supporting the hypothesis. A field book was with me at all times during events, interviews over coffee, or even daily walks about town. As I choose a notebook small enough to fit in my purse or a jacket pocket and used it frequently, people associated me with scribbling notes or became familiar with seeing me sitting at local cafés and restaurants late into the evening documenting the day's details. Notes were often taken in shorthand, and often before they were forgotten, copiously written in pages following initial scribbles, codes, and quotes. Seldom did I take precautions to hide that I was writing notes, something which is often done with informal interviews. This decision was made so that I wouldn't be associated with popular imaginations of anthropologists as spies (especially in post-socialist space). Instead, the elderly would sometimes mention that they knew what I was doing

[61] Mostly cited verbatim when possible, there are some instances where sections of quotes and conversations have been condensed; explained further in brackets to add to contextual notes; and edited for grammar and punctuation, to include dashes for interruptions, speaker pauses, or changes, and ellipses for omissions, trail-offs or unintelligible utterances and fillers. I have tried to stay faithful to meanings and words presented in transcriptions, while also trying to provide dialogue that is readable. To protect confidentiality, there are also some conversations that are attributed more vaguely than others.

[62] My assistant for the Northwestern Village was the primary translator during exploratory work in the north. In the south, I received assistance with transcription for some interviews and some help with my translations of those. Friends who are native Bulgarian speakers conducted cross-reading (cross-checks) of translations.

with notes or my recorder – I was akin to a journalist in their eyes, but they noted that I dealt more with the social or cultural aspects of their lives.

CHAPTER 4

Historical Contexts: "The first hundred years will be alright…"

Lisa: Aren't they [the youth] coming back, or?
…
A Grandfather: Who will come back, what will he do here?!
Someone Listening: … eh young will come but wait a little you are….
they will come [Translator thinks this is said rather ironically].
A Grandfather: The first 100 years it will be like this…
Translator: The first 100 years is like this [laughs]…
…
Someone Listening: Then others will come here.
- A conversation in the Northwestern Village

An expression that I sometimes heard in the Northwestern Village when I asked Bulgarian elderly about different aspects of their lives, was that, "The first hundred years it will be like this." My translator who accompanied me to the village explained that this fatalistic[63] saying was popular, was meant ironically, and expressed "a slight hope for a better future." People uttered the saying time and again. In one instance, a cherished grandfather in the Northwestern Village used it to explain the country's difficult economic situation and its income disparity. "The first 100 years will be alright…," he said laughing, "…and after will fix us."[64] In other situations, he used the saying to refer to his life as he was aging in place and with increasing demographic decline. Responding to questions about his well-being, the grandfather noted that the first hundred years were difficult or he would laugh and say that he felt young.[65]

[63] The use of "fatalistic" in this sentence is my own interpretation.
[64] My translator interpreted that in using the word "fix," the grandfather was referring to the "[economic] situation in the country, and better times" to come." A grandmother who took part in this conversation responded to both him and the saying. She noted that the country's economic situation would be "*very difficult to fix*" and that they wouldn't be alive to see changes. In doing this, she pointed out the irony.
[65] The saying left me with questions. If the first hundred years were like this and difficult, would the next be easier because the grandfather, and others experiencing stress would no longer be around? Were the first hundred years always difficult and part of life's continuities? Finally, why did the grandfather laugh about feeling young? Was it a coping strategy and a sign of adaptation and resiliency despite (or in-spite) of historical stressors in his life?

Examining the aging experience, resiliency, or strategies that the elderly construct for well-being in spaces and networks (such as creating memberships and coping based on overlapping experiences with peers), also entails looking at the "first hundred years" in terms of historical processes. These processes revolve around structural frameworks that have both caused continuity and change in people's lives. Many scholars, for example, note how modernity has effectuated change in the social fabric of "old-world" families, "communities," and interpersonal networks. Scholars in community and family studies have notoriously debated modernity as a destructive force that isolated individuals and tore apart traditional social values. Others have looked at how processes, such as migration or movement in urban and rural environments, have created innovation within people's networks. Rather than profoundly changing interpersonal relationships and social organization, these scholars argue that modernity has extended and even reinforced them. Work such as Simić's (1977) highlights that cross-cultural references are further important to consider during these debates, and show that modernity may or may not have disrupted traditional values (such as with the adherence to interpersonal relationships in the Balkans).

Historical processes and the debates around their effects on people and social organization have moved forward and extend today to new concerns involved with globalization, open borders, and the free exchange of technologies, ideas, and people. This chapter briefly explores some of the historical contexts that contribute to many Bulgarian elders' current narratives, life experiences, and strategies towards resiliency. While not exhaustive, this history included identities mixing at the crossroads of ancient history and Ottoman rule; families and borders within the Balkans and affected by wars; and life within socialism and "Democracy."[66]

[66] All these historical events had consequences on people's lives today because they stretched borders, changed systems and territorial boundaries, mixed population composites, and dispersed people (Lambros Comitas commentary, February 12, 2009; Hupchick and Cox 2001:2; Valtchinova 2006).

Crossroads of History and People

Many people I met across Bulgaria mentioned another popular expression when referring to the country's history and populations. They noted that Bulgaria was at a crossroads.[67] For some people, being at the crossroads was a metaphor for the country's geographic position, history, and relationship to ancient civilizations and identities. Bulgaria is thought to have been the cradle for the great Thracian civilization.[68] Historians have calculated that the Thracian presence in the area dated from 500 BC (BBC 2012), an estimate backed by the discovery of ancient settlements and unearthing of gold filled tombs particularly around the Black Sea. That presence also extended far into southern Bulgaria where settlements were found among the Rhodope Mountains (Crampton 2005). This area, lauded as the "Land of Orpheus" bears Greek and Roman traces too. Alexander the Great[69] "subjugated" the Thracians, and then the Romans followed suit (BBC 2012; Crampton 2005). After that time, mixes of Proto-Bulgar empires and then the Ottomans ruled. Today, tombs, Roman bridges, thermal baths, archeological sites (such as the Ancient Theater of Plovdiv), and mosques speckle the country and remind Bulgarians of past glory and connections. They also permeate everyday life and leave footprints on people's understanding of ethnicity, identity, and belonging.

Early Empires and Perceptions of Ethnicity

As noted in the previous chapter, people in the Northwestern Village were primarily Vlach, while Bulgarians and "Pomaks" mingled in the Southern Town. Historians note that the area separated by the Balkan mountain range has always been one of ethnic mixing.[70] Local conceptions

[67] For a written example of the cross-road metaphor, see Bukovski et al. (2009:5).
[68] The lands that are now Bulgaria existed before the Thracians, and Crampton (2005:1) notes that settlements existed as early as the Paleolithic period.
[69] It is important to note that Alexander the Great was a Macedonian King, especially since questions of who "owns" Macedonia were at the heart of Balkan territorial wars.
[70] See Crampton's work on Bulgaria or Mark Mazower's on the Balkans and identity.

and tour books about Bulgaria decree that people within ancient civilizations and empires held harmonious relationships (see for example Bukovski et al. 2009:5-19). While this is partly true, there was also a lot of dissidence and turmoil among people and territories. This often resulted in cultures accommodating, assimilating, or creating innovations.

Today, Turks and Roma are the largest ethnic minority groups recognized within the country, but interlocutors were quick to point out to me that many other groups existed. For example, three Vlach descendants from the Northwestern Village mentioned that Bulgaria was actually made-up from a variety of people.[71] The conversation went as follows:

> **Visiting Son (from the north):** Well in Bulgaria, all the ethnic groups comprise/form Bulgaria, practically … [Visiting Grandson and Grandfather start talking]
> **Visiting Grandson (from the north):** So, the living habits and language is Turkish, but they're actually Christians, they're of Christian religion; the opposite of…
> **Translator:** Pomatsi [Pomaks].
> **Visiting Grandson** …the Pomatsi.
> …
> **Visiting Son:** The Pomatsi are Bulgarians made to be Turks, they don't know Turkish, but they are considered Turks.
> **Grandfather (from the northwest):** No, wait a minute…
> **Translator**: [To Visiting Son] Not all of them.
> **Visiting Grandson:** Well there are … Karakachani, Shopi, Pomatsi, the Turks also are considered an ethnic group, gypsies, the gypsies…
> **Translator:** Turlatsi.
> **Visiting Grandson:** Turlatsi, well yes …
> **Visiting Son:** … Vlasi, gypsies.
> **Visiting Grandson:** These…well yes it seems like there are no Bulgarians, to be honest it seems like there are no Bulgarians, everyone is from an ethnic group.

Making a statement that everyone within Bulgaria is from an ethnic group draws attention to questions about origins. It also draws attention to a discourse that diverges from and proves

[71] Minority relationships in Bulgaria is a highly contentious issue, and not all Bulgarians readily recognize or accept these groups as minorities. Some people may view the groups as having different ethnic identities, and some may not.

resilient to previous government attempts to suppress minority identities, such as with the name changing campaigns discussed in the previous chapter (see Curtis 1992 on minorities in Bulgaria).

The first Bulgarian empire was founded in 681 by Proto-Bulgars who mixed with Slavs and whose khans ruled until 1014 (see **Appendix E**). A second empire[72] broke from Byzantine's hold and lasted (with interruption) from 1187 to just after 1393 (Crampton 2008:15-16). Crampton writes that the empire's greatest achievements were cultural, the largest of which was aligning land and people under Christianity (11). It was the Khans who created the first of a series of Bulgarian churches that both looked towards Eastern Orthodoxy and established their own authority.[73] They also promoted the use of Cyril and Methodius' Cyrillic alphabet[74] which curtailed Greek in Bulgarian language and church, and which helped to establish a literature (13). Crampton also notes that these efforts further helped the government maintain a stronghold over subjects and other powers (Christian Slavs, pagan Proto-Bulgar aristocracy, Byzantine, and the Greek Orthodox Church). Finally, they created an early Bulgarian nation (Crampton 2005:25) with an alphabet and religion that the majority of the country embraces today.

It is important to stress that the Proto-Bulgars mixed with a variety of populations already within Bulgaria. Underscoring the Thracian, Roman, and Greek presence, historians note that the linguistic and ethnic mixing continued centuries beyond these two empires to include Turks, Avars, Huns, Tartars, Magyars, Pechenegs, Serbs, and others (Crampton 2005 and 2008; Mazower

[72] There is some debate as to whether or not the second Bulgarian Empire was founded by two Bulgarian and arguably Vlach brothers (see for example Hupchick and Cox 2001 for detail).

[73] Crampton (2008:12) notes that aligning with Christianity was a conscious choice that Khan Boris made in 864 to reinforce Proto-Bulgarian presence in the area, and that aligning with Eastern Orthodoxy in 869-70 allowed the church an appointed Bulgarian Patriarch in Byzantium. The second empire also established an independent Bulgarian Patriarch in 1235, that Crampton notes was "head of a fully independent Church" and stressed "that it was a Bulgarian as opposed to a Greek or Roman institution" (2008:16).

[74]Cyril and Methodius were two brothers who were charged by Emperor Michael III to stave off Frank and German influence in Moravia by creating a written Slavic (Glagolitic) language (Hupchick and Cox 2001, map 9). The language created both union and division among people and between the "state" and church in mediaeval Eastern Europe. It is also celebrated publicly as a holiday in Bulgaria.

2002; Hupchick and Cox 2001). These groups often existed in mountain villages and enclaves which resulted in isolated customs, practices, and languages (Mazower 2002; Crampton 2008; Wace and Thompson 1914:273) – such as practiced by the Vlachs in Bulgaria (and in the Northwestern Village) today.

Brief "Origins" of Vlachs in Bulgaria

While they maintain their "ethnicity," few villagers in the Northwestern Village knew about their Vlach origins or history (though they knew that shepherding had always been part of life).[75] Turn of the Century historians Wace and Thompson (1914:256) remarked that little documentation exists about Balkan Vlachs who lived in hills during Byzantine or medieval times. Infrequent mentions of Balkan Vlach presence and language appear in stories dating from the 6th century, and the authors noted that these are linked to the death of Bulgarian Tsar Samuel in 976 A.D. (Wace and Thompson 1914:257). After that, areas of Thessaly, Southern Macedonia, Dalmatia, and Wallachia bear their name (as areas of Great and Little Vlachia) and their leadership (258-259). The authors also noted that theories exist connecting Balkan Vlachs with ancient Romans (as Romanized Dacians) and with Romania, but concluded that the origins might actually be a mix between different groups and times (272).

Finally, Wace and Thompson (1914) noted that the Balkan Vlach lifestyle, language, and ethnicity survived (or had been delayed from extinction) because Vlachs had been hidden in hills (273). This isolation had protected them from Greek influences, or they retreated into hidden areas during the Ottoman Empire (Wace and Thompson 1914:273; see also Mazower 2002:20 on escaping to hills). However, Vlach groups did assimilate or become absorbed into dominant

[75] In general, Winnifrith noted that Bulgarians were "never really interested in the Vlachs" when it came to their history (1987:44). This could be a consequence of assimilation policies under socialism that rewrote both people's histories and ethnicities (see Curtis 1992 for a discussion on this).

cultures. In fact, the authors noted that during their time much of the populations were dwindling under political and national influences (Wace and Thompson 1914:273). The Vlach populations I met were further dwindling but this time under economic influences and because of family out-migration.[76]

The "Ottoman Yoke" or "Turkey in Europe"

The end of the second Bulgarian empire was ushered by Turkish conquest in 1396. The Ottoman Empire ruled Bulgaria for 500 years and ended in 1878. Conceptions and experiences of ethnicity during this time moved towards orientalist and romantic understandings of what life meant within either an "Ottoman/Turkish Yoke" or a "Turkey in Europe."[77] In the first case, people depicted life under popular notions of violence,[78] Christian children being taken to become janissaries,[79] and taxes imposed on peasants. Elders in the Northwestern Village, for example, delighted in sharing childhood stories they heard of hillside bandits[80] who raided Turkish tax-collectors when they traveled village roads to collect their dues. They noted that both bandits and villagers often hid in secret hide-outs or buried their treasures (such as barrels of wine) (see also Wace and Thompson 1914:273).

Depending on their situation within the millet system and peasantry, some village populations experienced the presence of Turkey in Europe as a time of stability, prosperity, and new social organization (see Crampton 2005:29-30; Mazower 2002:17). Under Turkish rule, for

[76] In the Northwestern Village, people reminded me that they were Vlach but also Bulgarian. They noted that many of their grandchildren were losing some of what it meant to be Vlach, such as ties to language.
[77] See Mazower 2002 for a rich discussion on Balkan history and different understanding of "European Turkey" and Balkan identity.
[78] An example of this can be seen in the 1988 movie "Time of Violence" by director Ludmil Staikov. The film offers a dramatic (and traumatic) depiction of Turkish conversion campaigns and one Janissary's plight.
[79] As Crampton notes, the janissary corps was the elite Ottoman army whose ranks were supported from a tax called "*devshirme*" (2005:33). He also notes that the tax wasn't for cash, but of Christian boys who were collected (sometimes forcibly and sometimes not) from villages "at intervals of between one and seven years" (Crampton 2005:33).
[80] Mazower notes that this "brigandage" was seen as a "'heroic' way of making money" (2002:21).

example, ethnicity was neither recognized nor an official "creed," and instead religious affiliation demarcated groups (Crampton 2005:30). Non-Muslims were grouped into *millets*[81] and allowed self-organization and administration though they were "subordinate" to Muslim law (30). This meant that they had some autonomy to rule themselves. There was also a shift from aristocracy rule to a central Muslim ruler, which meant that inheritance and ownership of both people (master over peasant) and land changed (Mazower 2002:18). Eventually, this change led to the rise of *chiflik* estates whose landlords imposed pressure on peasant populations (who also had pressure on them from above), the rise of clan families in villages, and of later 'peasant democracies' (Mazower 2002:17-19).

Finally, historians note that the *millet* system actually allowed for a certain level of religious tolerance more than other areas of Western Europe during the time (Crampton 2005:30). Nevertheless, some conversion efforts did exist, particularly in Bulgaria given its strong Ottoman presence and Turkish desire to strong-hold a land at the crossroads between Europe and itself (34). These conversion efforts were not always violent and involuntary. Lesser Christian nobility within Bulgaria, for example, secured positions within an elite group if they converted to Islam (Crampton 2005:34, see also Mazower 2002). Some landowners and villages converted to avoid taxes or secure more favorable ones. And while some villages "Turkified," others held on to their Bulgarian roots, such as the Pomaks have (Crampton 2005:35).

Brief "Origins" of Pomaks in Bulgaria

Like the Vlachs in the Northwestern Village, the Bulgarian Muslims I met in and around the Southern Town form a minority group within Bulgaria. Primarily found in Rhodope regions, scholars argue that theories of their history and origins are contestable. Some of these theories

[81] Crampton indicates that originally four millets existed – Muslim, Orthodox, Armenian Christian, and Jewish (2005:30).

include that the Pomaks were indigenous populations that were forced to choose, were coerced into choosing, or voluntarily chose Islam from Turkish rule (see Ghodsee 2010:37). There are also numerous debates on their ethnicity depending on what side of a border the argument comes from – Greeks arguing their Thracian ancestry, Turks staking claims on Pomak identity, Macedonians arguing for their ethnicity, etc. (see Ghodsee 2010:38). Those found in Bulgaria practice Islam but many also maintain Bulgarian language and traditions, with some modification for religion (for an example see Chapter 9 on death anniversaries and commemorations).

Among arguments as to why Bulgarian Muslims might have converted from Christianity voluntarily, some scholars note that the Ottoman Empire offered incentives for doing so. These included not only tax breaks for the Muslim populations under the *millet* system, but also charitable trusts that provided villages with educational, cultural, and health facilities (Ghodsee 2010:40). In this sense, conversion was advantageous.

Lastly, because many Bulgarian Muslims continued to practice their former ways of life, they were able to request to maintain a mix of traditions and co-mingle with Christian populations (Ghodsee 2010:41). Attempts at their reintegration to Christianity appeared later under fairly unsuccessful renaming efforts in 1912-13, and then later with national efforts to "Bulgarianize" the group in 1942 (Ghodsee 2010:41). This later attempt was more successful (and coercive). It also remained in some elders' memories as they spoke to me about their lives. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these elders made references to their given birth names and second Bulgarian names.

People on the Borders: Liberation and World Wars

While the first empires in Bulgaria were at the crossroads of ancient civilizations, some people pointed out that the country has been at a continual crossroads because of territorial

boundaries. Geographically, Bulgaria shares its borders with Greece, Macedonia (The Republic of Macedonia), Serbia, Romania, and Turkey. These borders are further demarcated by their mountain ranges (the Balkan or "Old Mountain" range and the Rhodopes) and by the Black Sea.

Relationships among Bulgaria's neighboring countries have differed at various times depending on nationalism and its reach. So too has life within the country's borders. From the start of Turkish liberation in 1878, historians note that Bulgaria's peasant and agricultural communities saw stability and, at times, growth (see Crampton's work). Liberation from Turkish rule and small change in social structure also promoted peasant farm ownership (Gildea 1996; Mazower 2002; Crampton 2008). However, subsequent wars and territorial strife caused systematic stressors such as separating families across national lines and political change.

Agriculture and Village Life

Life in the Balkans during the late 1880s was heavily based on agriculture. Economic growth in the area came with population growth, decline of infant mortality, and better health (Gildea 1996:268). In other areas of Western Europe "agricultural crises" affected the peasant farmer because of economic depression and changes resulting from industrialization or urbanization, but Bulgarian small farm steads held strong with little "incentive to modernize" (279). And while scholars note that raising livestock was traditionally preferable in some of the Eastern European countries (Bulgaria included), the agricultural crises and regulations on cattle from the West prompted Balkan farmers to produce grains (Gildea 1996:281; see also Crampton 2008:282).

While changes in the West caused difficulties for large farm estates across Europe, the effect on Bulgaria was different. When Turkish landholders were expelled from the countryside in 1877-78, their property and farms were shared by families so that "small peasant proprietorships

became the rule" (Gildea 1996:281; Crampton 2007:287). In this way, scholars note, the fall of the Ottoman Empire benefitted small farmers (Mazower 2002). They also note, however, that stability stunted innovations and change that would have normally come with commercial farming and mechanization (see for example Crampton 2008:291).

19th Century Family Organization and the "Zadruga"

Historically, the majority of people in Bulgaria followed agricultural or pastoral lifestyles and lived in villages. Scholars document that during the Ottoman times these villages normally consisted of just a few hundred people, although larger villages with a few thousand inhabitants also existed (Crampton 2005:35). Family clans ran these communities and often chose a leader, or "*kmet*" (35).[82]

Early Balkan scholars generalized and called these family communities *"zadrugas*." They documented large, complex, and extended family systems that were primarily patrilineal and patrilocal. The household head was the father, although Vlachs I met insisted that it was their grandfathers whom they remember having to kiss on the hand. These clans could run three generations of family members or more. These members often lived together and shared property or territorial claims.

Scholars today note that there has been both a mythology and stereotyping of this family type, and that a range from nuclear to complex, joint families existed in the Balkans – not all of which can be called "*zadruga"* (see Todorova 1989). Many villagers in the Northwestern Village, for example, lived in nuclear families but explained that the household configurations I saw (mainly one or two elderly living in houses built for three generation families) were a far cry from what they remembered as very small children. In the past, interlocutors mentioned that 10 or more

[82] "*Kmet"* means "mayor" in Bulgarian. A mayor's appointment depends on village size. A large village can vote on a member, but I was told smaller villages usually have a *kmet* chosen for them.

people lived together in *plet* houses that usually had limited room (though these were not large "zadrugas"). The large configuration was welcoming to them, and offered support and a corporate family unit. Today they bemoaned their small local family size but remarked that family was abroad. In essence, the family was extended but no longer located in the village. Rather than using the term "*zadruga*," people I met spoke of family, family clans, and household numbers.[83] In fact, the term that historians have so readily used never came up in conversations.[84]

Revolts and Wars

As previously noted, liberation from Turkish rule was a relatively stable time for villagers in Bulgaria. The liberation also remains in their memories. One day, for example, I asked a shepherdess in the Northwestern Village to tell me about the village's origins. We had been out on a walk with her, and my translator and I wanted to know her views about history. She confused time-periods but stressed Turkish influence:

> **Shepherdess (from the northwest):**…in charge of us here was a Turk, for 500 years he ruled here and a time has come for him to leave and he did bad to the people, this is what old people say [Translator – When she says a Turk – she doesn't mean one single person in particular, but she refers to the time of Turkish yoke]. Now this…came, not this democracy but earlier…when everyone…on 9th September…the Turks left…they left and the Russians liberated us from the Turks…

Liberation from Turkish rule did not occur on the 9th of September (the 9th of September, 1944 was when Bulgaria merged with Allied Forces in WWII). In the 1870s, "Slav nationalism" was growing among the Balkan countries, and the more that the Ottoman Empire strove to stave off

[83] Todorova notes the term was not used to represent a family system in the Balkans until the 19th century, existed in "adjectival forms" that but meant "joint," "communal," or other similar meanings (1989:6). She also notes that various "complimentary" definitions/uses for a "*zadruga"* exist from a noun referring to different types of joint households, to definitions of it as economic practice a "process", or as an "ideal type" (Todorova 1989:6-8).

[84] Scholars today might remark that this is not unusual since many family configurations existed in the Balkans – from small, simple, and nuclear to large, migratory, or settled farm steads depending on location, religions, and within-culture diversity (see Todorova 1989; Mazower 2002).

national sentiments, the more it fanned them (Gildea 1996:402). Bulgaria was one of the first in the Balkan countries to thwart Turkish rule in 1878 after the Russo-Turkish War (Crampton 2008; Gildea 1996) (see **Appendix F**). During this period, borders began to shift with mergers between Rumelia, and in 1908 the Bulgarian king declared independence from Turkish suzerainty (Gildea 1996:402; Crampton 2008). A secret treaty between Serbia and Bulgaria (that later included Greece and Montenegro in 1912) solidified a pact between a "Balkan League" against the Ottoman Empire (Gildea 1996:408). It also began more shifting of borders as struggles for nation-state building and territory (particularly over who owned Macedonia) began the Balkan Wars.[85]

In May 1913, the Treaty of London was signed, and Turkey in Europe ended. A "Big Bulgaria" claimed a territory that included a large portion of Macedonia and the port of Salonika which angered neighboring Serbia, Greece, and Romania (Gildea 1996:411) (see **Appendix G**). A month later, these countries engaged in a second Balkan War, and Bulgaria lost a significant portion of its territory and prime agricultural resource areas (Gildea 1996:411; Crampton 2005:135). It would continue to suffer territorial loss and border changes during the first and second World Wars,[86] which many elders remembered had caused families and entire villages to split across borders. In September 1944, Bulgaria's fate aligned with Soviet powers as Russia invaded. This ushered in an era with a Communist Party and rapid political, economic, and social change for Bulgaria and its people.

Socialism, Democracy, and Change

[85] Territorial disputes and the drawing (and redrawing of Bulgaria's borders) occurred before the Balkan Wars when the 1878 Treaty of San Stefano outlined a large autonomous Bulgaria (BBC 2012). Four months later that territory was reduced with the Treaty of Berlin (BBC 2012).

[86] Bulgaria's position during World War II was originally aligned with Germany, but shifted by the end of the war with a coup d'état to the ALLIES Axis after Russia invaded on September 9, 1944 (Crampton 2008:279; BBC 2012; Wikipedia 2016: "Military History of Bulgaria during WWII).

Most of the elders I met in Bulgaria spent their mid-years during socialism and under Todor Zhivkov's government (1954-1989). Their narratives of this period included experiences with socialism's early beginnings, modernization and nationalization efforts, and consequences of rapid industrialization and urbanization – topics which the next chapter explores in more detail. Some of these stories recounted hardships with families having to give up land and animals, with people migrating across borders, and with changes to everyday life. These recollections spoke to challenges and transitions. As one interlocutor in the Northwestern Village mentioned, the regime was part of change in the "social order." "Explain to her like this*,"* he said, "during this socialism regime, not that I justify it or something like that …there was a moment of crises just like now, we are in transition from one social order to another."

Socialism in Bulgaria was a time of ideological notions of change and working towards modernization. On one hand, scholars and villagers alike note that the period brought material growth and wealth for rural populations (Creed 1998; Kaneff 2006; Wolfe 2000). It also led to infrastructure improvements, work opportunities, and total transformations to life through collective farming, technology, and a more communally aligned social organization (Creed 1998; Kaneff 2006; Konstantinov 1996; Wolfe 2000, Yurchak 2006).

On the other hand, it also caused movement that significantly affected households and family configurations. The same interlocutor who explained that socialism transitioned the social order, also noted that it brought out-migration:

> **Interlocutor (from the north):** During the nationalization after the war, this chaos which is similar to this one, back then the people have started seeking for salvation in the cities where there is [a] job, and again abroad, but illegally…later on they start going in Czech Republic to work there, in…Russia, a little later in the Arabic world…those who had economic relations with us there were migration processes back then as well as nowadays, but the migration processes in which the people from the villages have started to leave, this was at the time of the enlargement and nationalization in Bulgaria during…socialism.

Like other villages in the region, household movement continued in droves during the 1970s as family members either permanently or temporarily moved away for work and economic benefits. The main employment opportunities for the regions I visited in Bulgaria had been in factories or in the mining industry (see also Creed 1998 and Ghodsee 2010). Migration changed "household dynamics" because the "youth" settled away from primarily three generation farm configurations and left behind their elderly parents (though they would come back to visit frequently) (Lambros Comitas personal communication July 22, 2008; Creed 1998:132-135). At the same time, new opportunities, political pushes towards greater gender parity, and smaller family sizes shifted family structures, patterns, and social organization (Creed 1998; Crampton 2008; Krasteva and Marinova-Schmidt 2006).

Along with shifting household configurations, socialism also affected some groups' identities. People in both the Northwestern Village and Southern Town noted that border closing separated families and partitioned them. Closed borders also limited and halted transhumance. And while the Vlachs I met stressed that they weren't nomadic, they did remember national efforts to assimilate tenets of their lifestyle. These included language re-education before the first year of schooling so that children learned Bulgarian, Socialist secularization, and as previously mentioned, renaming efforts also affected and oppressed minority identities in both regions (see Ballinger and Ghodsee's 2011 work for a good example).

Democracy

Democratization came to Bulgaria at the end of 1989 and in the early 90s (with November 10, 1989 marked as the end of Todor Zhivkov's regime). Villagers (as well as small town elderly) noted that the following years brought difficult economic, political, and social change with them. These included multiple party lines and a parliamentary republic, "economic crises" and

movement towards a market economy, open borders and EU membership, and the effects of globalization and more permanent out-migration (BBC 2012; Krasteva and Marinova-Schmidt 2006:275). The elderly's narratives of village and small town progress (or apogee) during socialist times end in many of their accounts of democracy. One of the most significant issues that they express is the loss of people within their environment. To quote one elderly gentleman in the Northwestern Village, people were seen as "running away" when democracy came.

> **Elderly Gentleman (from the northwest):** Todor Zhivkov…like…they would…later they deposed him…the people, the *stopanstvo* [collective farm] was ruined and there was nothing the people would like to work in the agriculture anymore and they ran away to [the nearby town] [Translator – often in Bulgarian language we say run away instead of escape or find another solution, in this case [Elderly Gentleman] means that people were forced by the circumstances to go to [the nearby town] and seek for better work opportunities].

Such situations following the fall of communism, have led to post-socialist scholars such as Wolfe exploring various "problems of community" (Wolfe 2000).[87] They have also lead to explorations on post-socialist strategies and how, as Berdahl noted in her work in an East German border town, people "negotiate and manipulate a liminal condition created by the disappearance of a significant frame of reference" (1999:1,141). The next chapter in this work, for example, explores how the Bulgarian elderly I met negotiate their well-being and resiliency through past experiences working alongside the present to sustain conceptions of group identity and coping.

[87] In writing about post-socialist communities, scholars have noted that different types of socialism and theorizing about it lead to different types of communities in "abstract systems" (Wolfe 2000:204-205). Verdery (1991 and 1996), for example, examines conceptions of "ideal-type models" that have been used to compare questions about life before and after socialism's fall. Creed's (1998) monograph in a Bulgarian village looked at how people devised "viable strategies" under a socialist system that actually helped undermine it through "conflicting complementarity" (1998:3-5). Like Creed's (1998) work, Kaneff (2006) explores a "model village" that used strategies alongside experiences of history and socialism to position itself with resources and ideology leading to legitimization.

Part II

CHAPTER 5

An Aging "Post-Socialist" Cohort and their Past: Nostalgia's Place in the Elderly's Present[88]

Grandfather (from the northwest): Whoever has the money…can get anything.
Lisa: But hasn't that [Grandfather] always been the case, even under communism?
Grandfather: That's what I'm telling you…it's the same as then.

Nostalgia Coping to Stress

As previously mentioned, many elderly in Bulgaria are living in a time where they are aging in place because of a depopulating and aging landscape. Their family and intergenerational connections are often dispersed and located far away. This has shifted relationships for the elderly, though they value maintaining engagement and ties with both people and social systems (by adapting behaviors, expectations, and reliance on family and peers when possible and despite extreme stress that dwindling relationships can cause). This also means that today, more than before, the elderly in Bulgaria are grouped together in places where they might principally interact in age cohorts with overlapping experiences – such as having experienced life prior to, during, and post-socialism.

The Northwestern Village, for example, has become a type of "retirement community" with villagers noting that pensioners are the primary population. Villagers recounted that the past and its continual changes had visible stressing effects in the present.[89] Part of the aging experience in depopulating areas around Bulgaria involves people who remain in changing places where the

[88] Early versions of this chapter were first presented as papers for two conferences. The first was in October 2013 at the "Beyond Transition Conference" at Lund University, Sweden. The title of that paper presentation was "Time and Narratives in Bulgaria: Continuity and Survival in a Depopulating Northwestern Village" (Le Fevre 2013 [unpublished]). The second conference was in May 2015 at Trinity College, Ireland for the 2015 Annual Conference of the Irish Association for Russian, Central and East European Studies "Memories and Identities in Central and Eastern Europe." The title of that paper presentation was "Narrating Memories and Realities in Europe and 'Democracy': Elders' Accounts of Time, Place, and Lived Experiences in Bulgaria" (Le Fevre 2015 [unpublished]). Parts of these presentations also appear in the literature review found in Chapter 2 and in the conclusion.
[89] For an academic example of post-socialist changes see Berdahl 1999, Introduction p.11.

socialist state collapsed, occupations disappeared, infrastructure declined, and adult children and their offspring have been economically driven to move away.[90] While these family members may visit, elders (particularly in the Northwestern Village) mention that it is doubtful that their families will return to them for good. These elders' current experiences differ from a past socialist discourse of temporality that pointed to history as evolutionary, progressive, and future-orientated (Kaneff 2006:6-9, 63-65 for discussion on socialist temporality and history). This also leaves many elderly that I met interacting together and with the above stressors through tales of nostalgia.

Nostalgia has been examined through a number of lenses ranging from popular culture to academic disciplines such as philosophy, literature, or memory studies. Merriam Webster defines nostalgia as "the state of being homesick" or as "a wistful or excessively sentimental sometimes abnormal yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition" (2017: see the full or medical online definition).[91] It also offers a "simple definition" for nostalgia as the "pleasure and sadness that is caused by remembering something from the past and wishing you could experience it again" (Merriam Webster 2017: simple online definition of nostalgia).

Nostalgia, however, was not part of a passive memory process or longing. Instead, it involved complex understandings of past experiences working alongside present ones. As the chapter will explain, the elderly negotiated their tales through categories of paradox, irony, and reflection that scholars note exist in post-socialist narratives (Yurchak 2006; Velikonja 2009; Bošković 2013; Boym 2001). Moreover, these categories looked past binaries (Yurchak 2006) and

[90] Like many European countries, the economic and demographic situation in Bulgaria has "upset the age ratio" between age groups; has resulted in "premature" aging where unemployment might have forced people into early retirement, and increased concern with how countries can care for high populations of elderly who might be "vulnerable" (Kozhuharova and Dobreva 2007:57-58). As mentioned before, for the elderly in Eastern Europe and the Baltics, processes such out-migration and economic and political transition have sped up aging and its concerns (see Sinnott and Koettl-Brodmann 2015: vi, Kozhuharova and Dobreva 2007; Mladenov and Ilieva 2012).

[91] The full online definition also adds "something that evokes nostalgia" after the second definition (Merriam Webster 2017: full online definition of nostalgia).

did not imply wishing to return to the past (Velikonja 2009; Bošković 2013; Todorova 2009). In fact, they were reflections, as Boym writes, on how people could be "homesick and sick of home" at the same time (2001:50). If nobody wished to return to the past, what options were available to the elderly for using nostalgia as strategy? Maybe, as Velikonja suggests, there was a "wish to transcend the present" (2009:548). Or, perhaps nostalgia was a strategy that helped the elderly live in the moment while reflecting on it in order to keep on going.

This chapter explores how a "post-socialist" cohort[92] of elderly (elderly who lived through and shared experiences of the socialist state and are now living in and experiencing a time after it) form a group whose nostalgia actually functions as "timely tales" for coping, personal reflection, and resiliency. These "timely tales" are not passive longing for lost days. They are ways through which the elderly actively communicate and negotiate with others and with stress from structural forces. They further move through temporalities particularly in parallel with Toshko's time (a term elders used for time under the communist leader Todor Zhivkov until 1989),[93] and democracy. Finally, nostalgia that is paradoxical, ironic, and reflective offers the elderly coping and resiliency through humor, adjustment, and compartmentalization. It also challenges some perceptions of vulnerable elderly longing for pasts.

Timely Tales as Paradox and Humor

[92] References to post-socialist cohorts might also refer to generations who were born after the collapse of socialist states, or to generations with no experience of socialism. I'm employing the term "post-socialist cohort" to represent elderly who lived and share experiences of the socialist state and socialism, and who are now living and experiencing a time after it. It also represents a term for a group of elderly that both stem from a past that they are still engaged with in tandem with the present.

[93] The elderly were referring to Todor Zhivkov, the Bulgarian leader of the Communist Party from 1954-1989, and his government when they talked about time under "Toshko." As mentioned earlier, Ghodsee (2010) noted that people with whom she did fieldwork referred to the years 1946-1996 as a 'socialist' period, to their leaders as communists, and recognized that Bulgaria hadn't achieved full communism (pg.207, note 3). She also noted that they used terms interchangeably (Ghodsee 2010:207n3). The elderly I met referred to Toshko's time and time after 1989 as times during communism/socialism and time post-socialism and of democracy. In most cases, they referred to socialism and associated terms more than to communism.

Scholars have highlighted that post-socialist or communist nostalgia (and experiences) are rife with paradoxes and complexities that are neither "black" nor "white" (Yurchak 2006, see Wolfe 2000:206 on Berdahl's work). "Like Western democracy," Yurchak writes, "Soviet socialism was part of modernity" (2006:10). As part of a modernizing project, scholars such as Kaneff note that Bulgarian socialist history stressed teleological and ideological movement – moving "forward" towards "linear" or "evolutionary" progress that advanced from history rather than repeated it, and which would ultimately lead to communism (2006:63-65). Elders I met in Bulgaria highlighted paradoxes related to such ideas of temporal or ideological movement as evidenced in their present and past experiences. The paradoxes were that aspects of their current lives were either the same as they had been in the past, or they risked moving backwards.[94]

For example, a grandfather (Grandfather) I knew in the Northwestern Village drew parallels between elements that were "just the same" in socialist times as they were in Bulgaria's current democracy. When asked whether life was better in the past or the present, he surprised me by saying it was "just like now" (although later he did say it was better):

> **Lisa:** Was it better, in your opinion [Grandfather] to be a miner or…or a worker in the fields? During the communist times?
> **Grandfather (from the northwest):** It was for those who had government jobs [*laughs*] who didn't work [*laughs*].
> **Translator:** [*chuckling*] He said, if…if…
> **Grandfather:** [I]n the government –
> **Translator:** Ah, it was, uh better for him to work in the administration he says.
> **Grandfather:** [J]ust like now, just like now...good, there in the parliament, and that one hasn't [translator – he means it was good for the people in the parliament, not for the normal people].
> **Translator:** Just like now [Grandfather chuckling in the background]. Now are the…the best is for the people in the government…

[94] Explorations and conceptions of "backwardness" in the Balkans have taken many shapes and include studies of the term's (and similar terms) implications regarding national identity making, economies and practices, and different political periods. Here, the term is stemming from conversations of people's experiences, such as having lost machinery with which the elderly I met used to till land.

Using humor, Grandfather relayed that those with access to resources and networks within the government had it better off both in the past and in the present. One could say that the ideological system was paradoxical in the sense that only certain people benefited from it under a socialist system and "just like now" under democracy.

This timely tale offered a reflection of the past to comment and even accommodate (or adjust to) the present. As the story continued, Grandfather explained other situations in which benefits were seemingly equal, but not in actuality. "These say now it was better during communism, it was equal … you have a shirt of 5 leva and I have my shirt for 5 leva, if you want something better, but it wasn't, equal prices..." At this point the story stressed a value system. The prices of the shirts were the same even if one shirt didn't really have better quality over the other. Equality was what mattered in that sense, a value system, not the reality of quality. He ended his story with the here and now, "and nowadays these come here with the bags, give me this much for this item, they give you Chinese goods that don't worth anything…" Now, the paradox is having no control of prices or of quality.

Grandfather further explained that those who had money or connections thrived under socialism through networks, which is no different than today. In fact, providing an example of pharmacies that closed because of no interpersonal connections and debt, he made an interesting equation. Just as people suffered loss in the market economy, or with buying power as pensioners or as the unemployed, they also suffered losses of some sort under socialism. The past to him was the same as the present.

He also pointed out that taking land away in the socialist times (which was part of collectivization efforts) had consequences (and paradoxes) that echoed in the present. Both he and a visiting son from the north explained that collectivization had destabilized some people. Not

knowing what to do when their land was appropriated they left across borders to search for jobs. The men thought this was similar to Bulgaria's present times in which people migrated out of the country for work.

> **Grandfather (from the northwest):** Back then, the people in order to get their land like now because God takes your soul, everyone was wondering where to go and what to do. Some started [g]oing somewhere else in the country to look for jobs.
> **Visiting Son (from the north):** Just like nowadays…
> **Grandfather:** And so it happened, some ran away through the border they went to Serbia and from there to different places …
> **Visiting Son:** They went to America and further [talks mumbling] Argentina –
> **Grandfather:** –in Serbia and from there wherever one found a chance…
> …
> **Grandfather:** And so, it started from back then, and I was a soldier then, in 1949 I entered in the army…and after that I started working on the buildings here and there [Visiting Son interrupts]
> ….
> **Grandfather**: Later…when, now when they give them back the lands and they don't want them back and [*laughs*].

The two men explained that taking the lands had left people with change and a traumatic experience, but the paradox was that many didn't want those lands back when they could claim them. For some people, the lands had been taken by force. These people received worse lands in their place. Other people became used to the changes and to the modernization efforts that socialism brought. When lands became available after the fall of communism (or the collapse of socialism), some people didn't want them because they no longer had access to the machinery and mechanisms that had been assured to them under the state. The paradox then was that opportunities to retrieve land also caused people trauma.

> **Grandfather (from the northwest)**: See now back then they took the good lands and they used to plough with machines, and those who didn't want to sign in they had here 2 decares there some land in the dunghills, in the [holes] where nothing can be grown there.
> **Visiting Son (from the north):** In [unintelligible] where nothing can be grown.
> **Translator:** Hm-hm.

Grandfather: [A]nd they want their quota, back then they were collecting quota.
Visiting Son: [… talks simultaneously with Grandfather]
…
Translator: …they would take the nice land, the nice spots, but...and if you don't want to give up your land they'll take it from you, but they'll give you back …
…
Visiting Son: Back then it was the same as what it is nowadays…during democracy, well they give back the people their lands by force, the people don't want it…to work on it collectively, they just got used to a different organized life…That organized life was in a sense somehow comfortable for them. Well one works there…
Translator: …but the people were not used to having it any more they had another…they were used to another way of life…felt some kind of a little comfort…
Visiting Son: They don't want the land because the land in the national "*stopanstva"* [collective farm] is worked on mechanically, everything is done mechanically, and when one takes [Grandfather says something] with the donkey, yes …
…
A paradox, they gave back the land to the people wanted or not, some took it back willingly, some by force, some were happy that they take their land back, some didn't want it back. Because they knew it meant all the struggle coming back again, so they start, some had ploughs seed-drills, farm equipment, the government takes it all during the enlargement. Some people have hidden their things in holes somewhere … they take out those ploughs, they have become rusty, well … primitive, the people start inventing their own tools, tractors, because they have no money to buy…

Past and Present Ironies

Paradoxes that elders recounted through nostalgia and equated to the present also included irony. Scholars who examine irony within post-socialist or post-communist nostalgia do so in different ways. For some, such as Bošković (2013) and Velikonja (2009) irony in nostalgic tales represents strategy. For Velikonja (2009), it serves as a coping strategy that criticizes the present but that doesn't strive towards "hegemonic ambitions" (539) or an "ambition of re-creating the past" (547). He also notes that the best way to understand nostalgia is by understanding the present and the conditions which "*homo nostalgicus* implicitly criticizes" (Velikonja 2009: 546).

The material conditions in the Northwestern Village were dire. In a depopulating landscape, people lived on abandoned streets with houses in ruin. Most people who were left in

the village lived alone or with an aging spouse if they were lucky. Families in the town would visit on weekends if possible and those abroad were said to send remittances. The paved road in and out of the village was dilapidated, so much so that the weekly doctor no longer wanted to drive to visit the people. Furthermore, socialization and networks were at risk, causing feelings of loneliness and abandonment. In the face of all of this, the nostalgic irony was situational and took a humorous tone for coping. "In the past, we had money but no things," was one jokingly ironic tale that my translator noted, "Now we have things, but no money."

Nostalgic tales under these conditions seemed justified, but my translator was surprised at accounts she heard from people referring to socialist moments of work, flourish, or bounty as they juxtaposed with her memories of communism's fall. In her early 30s, she thought and remembered everyone being "happy" that democracy came. That was not the situational irony. The irony was that when asked if they wanted families back, and wanted to return to past times, nobody did. The point, one elderly gentleman noted, was to go "forward, not backward."

As mentioned before, moving forward in Bulgaria was often equated with moving away. As Christine Fry writes, globalization is at the heart of "understanding the communities we study" and has resulted in both the "stretching and deepening of social relations across national borders" (2009:186-187 in Sokolovsky). As also noted before, this process (along with urbanization and industrialization) is not new to Bulgaria. What is new is that the country now (officially) belongs within Europe (the EU).

When today's "Europe" enters the elderly's tales, it is often a distance place where families have gone. Having coffee with grandmothers in the Southern Town, for example, uncovered stories of families in England, Italy, or Greece. The distance could mean less physical contact, altered family responsibilities, and even despairing about loss of the language if some

grandchildren living abroad were not fully speaking Bulgarian.[95] Missing family members also might mean not having help at home, if one were ill, or to bolster low pensions (unless remittances were coming in). Grandmothers and aunts described these realities as life being "hard." Why is life hard? It was because, as one aunt (Lelia) noted, "There is no money. You want to buy things, but there is no money. You want to create a cozy home…nice furniture and other things…at least the coffee should be sweet."

Placating that "at least the coffee should be sweet,*"* helps to also sweeten the present. Although a saying that stems from the past, Lelia used it as a way to reflect on and cope with her current life. Examined through post-socialist nostalgia's lens, such nostalgic sayings also contribute to what Bošković (2013:60-65) calls the "polyphonie" of individual voices reflecting on their present moments and experiences. He further notes that these voices often indicate a dislocation from the past (Bošković 2013:60-61).

Returning to a time in the Northwestern Village, a grandmother who was sitting on a bench outside of her home once told me her views on a principal object missing from the village – its bell. Stolen in the middle of the night while people slept, villagers recounted that the theft not only represented a dislocation in time from their own past but a troublesome reflection on the present. In their opinion, the past was a time of no crime (or if any, little) but lawlessness reigned now. It was hard to tell who may have stolen the bell, though people had different ideas and the grandmother said people knew. Mentioning instances of other thefts, it was clear that the grandmother felt there was a unique injustice to the justice system there:

> **A Grandmother (from the northwest):** [A]nd they caught him, why did they let them go?

[95] In the Northwestern Village, there was a risk that grandchildren abroad were not learning Vlashki, the Vlach dialect that the majority of people there spoke. However, grandmothers were delighted knowing about the words (either in Bulgarian or Vlashki) that very young grandchildren abroad knew.

Translator: Hm-hm, she says that they know who actually stole it and they caught these people and these people have stolen…other…many things from other house[s] or so…and she said that they know who are these people, they caught them but then later on they released them, she says why do they release them?
A Grandmother: Yes.
Lisa: Hm-hm.
A Grandmother: [A]nd here, what is this, is it the same like this with you, ha?
Translator: Is it the same way how it works for you there, like, this is the way to deal with things?
A Grandmother: …criminal, don't they sue him?
Translator: If it's a criminal, doesn't he [go] to…[don't] they take him to court?
Lisa: "Da, da."
A Grandmother: [T]hey will sue, but not here with us.

The grandmother also added a comment that, "…there is nowhere else like here in Bulgaria, freedom and democracy."

Many elderly I spoke to thought that thieving had become part of their experience with democracy. When directly questioning people as to what democracy meant to them compared to how I knew it in America, some villagers would say that it was a type that was uniquely theirs, or "ours." A Grandmother (Grandmother in a Field), whom I met in the Northwestern Village while she was out in a field watching animals with Grandfather from the northwest, explained her idea of this unique democracy:

Grandmother in a Field (GF from the northwest): … if one wants to put you on fire, he will, if wants to kill you, he will… And there with you in America is otherwise/different.
Translator: And in the States, it's different.
Lisa: Mm hmm, but we're a democracy in the States.
GF: But they have democracy too, but it's not like ours.
Translator: Ah ha, it's a different one.
Lisa: Ah ha.
GF: They have had this democracy, they have grown up with it.
Translator: You've grown up with this democracy and it's for a long time.
GF: It's from a long time ago, and we didn't have such a thing so far –
Translator: And we didn't have this thing…before...
GF: [I]t's difficult for the people to apprehend it–
Translator: So, that's why it is difficult for people to…
Lisa: Mmm hmm.

GF: –this poverty.

Moving in tandem with their memories, many elders noted that democracy in Bulgaria meant lawlessness, no consequences to this lawlessness, and in essence a "democratic" (to use a term Velikonja does for loss) "deficit" (see Velikonja 2009:547 for terms of deficit). This deficit left people with what Bošković would probably refer to as "a bitter odor of irony" (see Bošković 2013:67 on feelings of loss 1960s growth and order in former Yugoslav). Northwestern Grandmother in a Field also noted this bitter irony by explaining in the past that they used to have money and were rich, but that today she thought the wealth had changed type:

> **Grandmother in a Field (GF from the northwest):** [T]here were factories, there was everything and they sold them for yellow coins [Translator – the phrase "for yellow coins" means for very cheap]
> **Translator:** Mmm hmm.
> **GF:** [A]nd they brought foreigners from other countries to….to work, and they chased ours [Translator – ours means our people – Bulgarians] to other countries, what happened I don't know.
> **Translator:** They were …then they sold the factories to…
> **GF:** …they brought the drug addicts, they brought the prostitutes and that's it.
> …
> **GF:** That's it.
> **Grandfather (from the northwest):** Rich in this.
> **GF:** We are rich in this now.

Finally, Bošković notes that ironic nostalgia also refers back to "a 'socialist state symbol' that each new day would bring a better future" (2013:68). In the case of a stolen bell in the Northwestern Village (see Chapter 9), it was unclear to villagers what the future would bring other than their own disappearance and demise. Stealing the bell was stealing the villagers' futures, and even their chance to ring in their afterlife. As one elderly gentleman noted, most ironic of all was that the only person holding real faith (religious in this case) had lived across from that bell. Unfortunately, she died after it disappeared and nobody rang for her death. That, to him, was a unique example of his current state and situation. Stories of a missing bell could be read as a

"symbolically loaded phenomena" harkening back to a more secure past with people and structure – a case of "'Although everybody stole, they never lacked anything'" (Bošković 2013:68, 71 see his reference on 'The Seven Miracles of Communism').

Reflections

Boym, who looked at post-socialist nostalgia as a type of survival strategy used to "make sense of the impossibility of homecoming," noted that nostalgia could be restorative and reflective (2011: xvii). She writes that reflective nostalgia is flexible, allows people to move alongside times in order to make meaning, and does not have to constitute a longing for the past (50-51). In fact, she writes that "a modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once" (Boym 2011:50).

Being sick of home was a sentiment I encountered in many nostalgic tales. This type of timely nostalgia often recounted paradoxes or used humor, but did so to help people compartmentalize their current situations and adjust for stress. I first encountered this coping in the Northwestern Village in 2008 and 2010 concerning politics and politicking, and it continues today across Bulgaria. In winter 2013, for example, I had my own nostalgic moment while sitting in a grandmother's warm downstairs TV/kitchen/bedroom located in the Southern Town. Holding a knitting session with a visiting neighbor, this 80-plus year old and her friend shook their heads at strikes and talks of parliamentary elections blaring on the television. There were too many parties "now" they chuckled. At least in the past there was but one.

The joking could imply a long-standing jest that politics in present Bulgaria was but a variation of past continuities. I had also heard this in the Northwestern Village in 2008. Then, my interlocutors frequently wanted to know about elections in the US and asked me about our political parties. A grandfather told me that he had been part of "the party" (the Communist Party) under socialism because everyone "signed-in." It was implicit – there was but one party and choice.

The elderly I met noted that the Bulgaria in which they lived in at the time had multiple parties instead of just one. When talking about present-day parties and politics, they mentioned themes like corruption or warnings from the EU, but they never mentioned returning to the past. Instead, they often used humor and jokes to get by. I noted an example in my field book during a conversation between a grandfather and a visiting relative who claimed that Bulgaria had:

> …ten parties… and [the grandfather] exclaiming that he had, in fact, none. Of the ten parties that existed the [relative] joked creating cases such as babas (grandmas) having a party, the village having a party (and gets together to talk politics). I mentioned that the sheep don't have a party and the [relative] added that the dog didn't have a party. The moment was congenial and jovial.

Joking encapsulated resilience, self-reflection, and nostalgic tales which all played out in the present. As Grandmother in a Field and Grandfather from the Northwestern Village exhibited when they were talking to me about democracy, joking added humor to life's difficult situations:

> **Grandmother in a Field (from the northwest):** [B]efore, before this democracy came our sheep were in the fields…calves…the fields, in the forests, everywhere here there were cattle-sheds with calves, with cows, with everything, where are they [Translator thinks she wants to say "Where are they now?" as a metaphor], nothing gets stolen, no harm, and nowadays they come in your yard and they steal your live stock from your yard, that's it.
> …
> **GF:** [T]he gypsies are hungry –
> **Translator:** Nowadays they come here…
> **GF:** –gypsies are hungry my girls [Translator – "my girls" is a nice way to address young females, very often used by the elders in Bulgaria)
> …
> **Grandfather (from the northwest):** It's not just the gypsies.
> **GF:** Gypsies and Bulgarians, and all of them…they are hungry.
> **Translator:** She says it's not only the gypsies over here…
> **Grandfather:** Well there are some [Translator – he means "some people") that are just fine even now, but…[*laughs*]
> **GF:** [T]here is, who is this one, whoever was able to…like this, to benefit from this democracy they got rich, riiiich [drawn out], richer from the richest, yes and the other people.
> **Grandfather:** …millions and [billions]
> **GF:** Ha, [billions] and millions and even more than this, and now for the others, the other people are poor, poor, we are poor.

Narratives about free-roaming cattle before democracy and animal thefts from yards afterwards highlight positive experiences of socialist life prior to 1989 and depicts subsequent life under democracy as bleak. Despite this, Grandmother in a Field and Grandfather could joke and laugh about negative circumstances through shared experiences, memories, and understanding. Their mutual joking and shared experiences also enabled them to express concern about and tap into an ability to cope with present-day political, economic, and social divides.

In addition, Cellarius noted that she frequently encountered similar narratives in the Rhodopes where a nostalgia for a "'better life' under socialism" placed the "more negative aspects of the socialist system in the background" (2004:96-97). She rarely heard people talk about these negatives (such as past fears around making political jokes or assimilation campaigns), or about their preference for the present (Cellarius 2004:97). I also rarely heard people tell me that they preferred their present circumstances. However, as some of the narratives in this and other chapters show, the elderly weren't relegating negative aspects of the past into the background. Instead, they were confronting and exhibiting an ability to cope with issues in both their present *and* past lives.

Agreeing that nobody wishes to return to the past, and everybody is "sick of home" (Boym 2001:50), the elderly I met in Bulgaria formed a post-socialist cohort that talked about the past through nostalgia that helped them cope with present stress in their lives. Their nostalgia was "timely" in that it also allowed the elderly to recount paradoxes, ironies, and reflections from the past in tandem with complex understanding of their current situations. Not just collective memory, nostalgia also offered a collective space for humor, adjustments, and compartmentalization that provided people with moments of continuity and resiliency.

It also tied elders to engagement with both systems and with peer groups, especially as retirees aging and responding together to structural political, economic, and social forces. Like

Myerhoff's senior center elders who "required witnesses to their past and present life and turned to each other for this, though it is a role properly filled by the succeeding generation" (1980:33), the elderly I met turned to peer relationships that "bound" them and which formed from "continuities between past and present circumstances, and social isolation"(9).[96] The next chapter further explores how the elderly communicate and strategize their positions as groups of pensioners within present-day experiences of aging in Bulgaria.

[96] Myerhoff noted that the tightly bound relationships that the elderly formed at the center never fully coalesced into strong forms of organizations because they were based on peers who were growing older and who couldn't serve as "heirs" (1980:33). In addition, the "continuities between the past and present circumstance, and social isolation" were what Myerhoff called "two conditions" that "characterized" the elders not only throughout a lifetime, but which also helped them train and develop "resourcefulness" and "survival strategies" (1980:9). In addition, social isolation paradoxically freed the elderly to create and innovate (see Myerhoff 1980:9).

CHAPTER 6

"I am retired": Pensioners' Economic Challenges

"She has 24 years of service, but it is not recognized. These years are not enough for her to acquire the right to be retired. She needs to work another 7 years and purchase five additional years, according to law."
- A Grandfather in a Village near to the Southern Town talking about why his wife doesn't receive a pension

In the previous chapter I argued that the nostalgia through which groups of retired elders communicate actually serves as "timely tales" for a "post-socialist" cohort of elderly engaged in coping strategies. Nostalgia, however, isn't the only way that the elderly interact with each other and with dominant forces causing them stress. They also recount current tales about their social, political, and economic experiences as pensioners. In doing so, many of the elderly actively engaged and identified with peer groups who "shared" experiences in spite of (and in response to) present-day difficulties in their lives.

For example, there were two questions (in one form or another) that I often asked people to engage them with research and conversation about their present situations. "How do old people live here?" I would probe. "How do pensioners live in Bulgaria?" While the questions themselves are distinct, responses to being old often included people self-identifying as a "pensioner." They also elicited a range of similar responses across groups to echo that life could be "bad," "difficult," or "hard."

Personalizing the question by asking individuals to describe their lives at a particular place contextualized the narrative about being a pensioner. However, patterns continued in and among stories. For example, during an interview conducted in spring 2013 and in a Small Village near the

Southern Town, a 70-year-old grandfather answered that his life was good.[97] However, there was a caveat that while life was good, it was also poor – "poor" being a theme I frequently heard from those who described life as "difficult." "Life is good, but life is poor..." he said, "Poor but otherwise nice."

When further prompted to reflect on why his life was good but poor, the conversation moved toward what social scientists might consider a model opportunity for the sociological imagination. Answering about his own plights and predicaments, this grandfather also seemed to speak for a cohort of people and their situational and economic contexts. "Because democracy here is not democracy," he offered. "I mean as in other countries. There is no democracy here. I am retired."

This chapter explores both the experiences and issues that elderly in Bulgaria narrate they interact with as a larger group called pensioners. Pensioners are disadvantaged by demographic and economic forces working within Bulgarian society and against them. These include how they must negotiate acceptable standards of living as well as their lives under the current pension system. Like their nostalgia, the tales pensioners tell about these stressors are not passive. They include ways of both talking about and facing their current realities and socio-economic worlds.

The Economic Issues Concerning (and of Concern) to Bulgarian Pensioners

The overall issues facing the elderly and aging in Bulgaria concern not only demographic distress but also economic forces that produce hardships. In a report underscoring the economic impacts of aging in the country, the World Bank noted that demographic problems include a rapidly aging population due to low fertility rate, high mortality or "stagnant life expectancy"

[97] It is important to note that during this interview, the village mayor had been present, something which might affect or influence conversations. However, while the individual noted that life was good, discussion revolved on challenges found in his life that others echoed such as difficulties living from pensions.

stemming before 2000, and emigration (World Bank 2013: xi, 1). From 1990 emigration has resulted in a 10 percent loss of the "economically active population" (World Bank 2013: xi), which leads to grim realizations for both the country and its pensioners:

> In recent years, demographics have become more unfavorable as Bulgaria heads for the steepest decline in the working-age population world-wide by 2050…By 2050[98], one in three Bulgarians is projected to be older than 65, while only one in two will be of working-age (World Bank 2013:3).

The nation's overall poverty rate further exacerbates the problem. "Contrary to most countries in the world with an aging population," the World Bank adds, "Bulgaria has become old before becoming rich" (World Bank 2013: xxvvii).

Poverty is a vulnerability that academics, policy makers, and others say plague a majority of Bulgaria's elderly. While organizations such as the World Bank, the Bulgarian government, and the media note that efforts are being made to deal with the issues, poverty creates obstacles.[99] For Bulgarian pensioners, it also impedes access to sufficient pensions, to an acceptable standard of living and purchasing power, and to an overall quality of life (World Bank 2013: xiii-xiv, see also page 9; Draganov 2009; Andreeva 2009).

Negotiating Pension Expense as "Balkan People"

The 70-year-old grandfather who mentioned that democracy in Bulgaria wasn't the same democracy as elsewhere had been retired for 25 years. I visited him and other pensioners in a Small Village near to the Southern Town to conduct interviews about their life there. The village identified as Bulgarian Muslim and was nestled in the mountains near to the Greek border. According to the village's mayor, it had 365 people registered in it with permanent addresses at

[98] The year 2050 figures prominently as a doomsday scenario in many population aging studies, but Bulgaria's projection is particularly troublesome given that it's dependency ratio (or "ratio of pensioners to assured people") has been estimated to reach 92.8 percent by then (Andreeva 2009:143).

[99] It serves as a barrier for the elderly's access to a "quality of life, which includes incomes, access to health care, good educations, opportunities…"- a country focus according to Bulgaria's Deputy Prime Minister and Social Minister (Raicheva 2015).

the time. He noted that 97 of those people were pensioners, or 26.5% of the village population. This number is also worth mentioning because it both contributes to and is higher than the regional percentage of elderly in the area at the time (19.6% at the end of 2013) (National Statistical Institute 2013[a.] Demographic Processes).

The main theme that dominated interviews with this grandfather (as well as with other elders in that place) was what it was like to be a pensioner. Formerly a miner, the grandfather reported that his pension was 570 leva a month (approximately $400 per an exchange rate of 1 USD to 1.4217 BGN at the end of 2013) (Exchange Rates.org.UK 2016). This was a relatively higher sum than most reported, considering that in 2008 some elderly I spoke with anecdotally estimated that the average pensioner received about 130 leva monthly and the miner about 700.

According to data compiled from Bulgaria's National Statistical Institute, the average monthly poverty line for the country in 2013 when meeting this grandfather was 285.92 BGN per person (National Statistical Institute 2013[b.] Poverty and Social Indicators in 2013). The average yearly pension income per household that year was 2,915 BGN (Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute 2017),[100] or 243.75 BGN divided by 12 months for a year. However, in 2013, this grandfather's narrative pointed to many problems that pensioners across Bulgaria grappled with, despite his higher pension. Interviewed with the help of a friend (Guide from the south) and the village mayor, I asked him if his pension was enough. "No, it is not enough. For 16 years I have worked in the mines and now I get 570 leva. It is not enough."

[100] Republic of Bulgaria National Statistical Institute (2017). Annual Data Time Series for 2010-2015. Monetary Income of Households by Sources of Income. http://www.nsi.bg/en/content/5687/annual-data?page=1. See also National Statistical Institute (2013[c.]) for more information on pensions and on 2013 household income, expenditure, and consumption.

Struggling with illnesses from having worked 16 years in the mines, this grandfather explained that his money was spent on health, his wife, and his livestock. He noted that he lived with a pump and drugs, and that his heart and lungs hurt. His pension extended to his 64-year-old wife who was unemployed and didn't receive a pension. All health and other costs fell to him. When asked about his wife's unemployment and why she didn't work, he answered that she had worked 24 years of service under a "*stage*" (a type of internship or unpaid employment). However, he noted that according to new laws under "democracy" she needed to work another 7 years in order to purchase five years towards receiving a retirement pension.[101]

The resources that this couple did have included livestock such as sheep, goats and chickens, and provided for hunting dogs for the grandfather's hobby as a hunter. My friend probed the subject and engaged further with the topic of animals. When it was suggested that these animals were useful for provisions, the gentleman countered that they were expensive because they had to be maintained. Further conversation offered suggestions that the couple give-up some of the animals, but the gentleman could not do so as it was part of his traditional understanding of life to care for them. When asked if his life situation exemplified that of others in the Small Village near the Southern Town, he answered that it did. "Yes, it's like this for everybody. Why are you laughing? Such is life here." In response, my friend further asked if everyone wanted animals to which he answered, "Yes. To have animals, we are Balkan [mountaineer] people."

Measuring up to Life – Economies and Living Standards

[101] Manov (2013:75) explains that during the period of transition from a socialist, centrally planned economy to free market principles the country underwent many financial insurance strains with the pension system having a key place of concern and which underwent major reform in 2000. This reform set up a three-pillar system that included: 1) a public social insurance pillar, which was an existing pay-as-you go plan from the former planned economy; 2) an "additional mandatory pension insurance" that was based on private accounts and which had two funds (a universal and a professional); and 3) an additional voluntary pillar (Manov 2013:75). Those pillars will be discussed further in the chapter.

While this grandfather's story was his own, its insistence on maintaining traditions (keeping animals) for himself and a set of people living in the mountains brings to light two other important issues for Bulgarian pensioners. The first involves Bulgarian pensioners' conceptions of what it takes to maintain an acceptable "standard of living," such as keeping livestock. The second deals with the Bulgarian retirement system and how its conceptualization serves to standardize how acceptable living is actually experienced.

A "standard of living" can be categorized and influenced in multiple ways, often being measured economically by indicators falling above or below a nation's "poverty level" (Chen 1977). Although difficult to quantify because cross-cultural and individual definitions vary, gerontological literature has underscored three elements for maintaining economic well-being during retirement – income adequacy, poverty, and income security (Chen 1977:102-103).

> When income is secure and adequate, any person, young or old, may compete in the marketplace for food, shelter, and clothing; for medical and educational attention, and the like. The satisfaction of such basic human wants indeed depends on the command of dollar votes (Chen 1977: 102).

The literature further highlights that maintaining economic "adequacy" is directly correlated to emotional well-being. As Chen notes, "Many needs of the elderly and much of their isolation and unhappiness may be traced to the inadequacy and insecurity of income" (1977:102).

Indeed, many elderly I spoke with in Bulgaria referred to a lack of finances or purchasing power associated with their pensions and economic situations. This can be traced back to pressures exerted on the pension system itself. Transition from a centrally-planned economy to a free market one caused extreme stress to the country's insurance system, with the pension system requiring major reform in 2000 in an attempt to raise pensioners' standards of living (Manov 2013:75). Declining employment and contributions strained revenue in countries undergoing "transition,"

such as Bulgaria, causing drops in revenue, necessitating using disability or early retirement funds, and resulting in a high dependency ratio on these systems (Dupont 2004:58).

Among pensioners today, many reports indicate that women, who tend to live longer than men in Bulgaria but who are often expected or forced by circumstances to retire earlier, suffer a greater risk of poverty and social isolation or exclusion (Stoilova 2006: 9 citing a 2006 UNIFEM report; see World Bank 2013 on possible ways to mitigate effects). Their situations have changed from the previous socialist era which, as scholars such as Ghodsee (2004) note, granted women a greater range of public welfare policies and services, including early retirement (see Ghodsee 2004:27 on policies). In addition, Verdery notes that there was a dependence on a state that claimed a central "provider" role for everyone (over family and "individuals") as part of a "socialist paternalism" (1996:24-25). She writes that one seemingly "positive face" of socialist regimes "was their promises of social redistribution and welfare" (24) to meet people's basic needs in ways that assumed positions as "The Benevolent Father Party" (25).

In discussing the case of pre- and post-socialist gender regimes with a focus on employment, Stoilova (2006) eloquently mentions that turning to non-formal networks of support from kin and friends was one survival strategy to cope with the "human cost" of transformation (10).[102] It was also a strategy for pensioners who could no longer rely on a government's "paternalism." Like the elderly Simić (1977) wrote about in 1970s Yugoslavia, the elderly I met in Bulgaria valued remaining engaged and tied to interpersonal relationships for cultural reasons, but they were also tied to the economic support and security those relationships offered them. Networks that used to provide "informal" support provided more primary supports, such as with

[102] Stoilova (2006) briefly mentioned these formal networks within her article because it wasn't the main topic of her paper, she importantly points out, however, that transformation had a "human cost" that necessitated such strategies.

the grandfather at the beginning of this chapter who used his pension for his wife's care too. Family members located nearby, to offer another example, might help the elderly out with care or with material goods. However, as the grandfather we met in the Small Village near to the Southern Town noted, the elderly still had to negotiate just how far a pension could go.

> **Guide (from the south):** Do your sons and daughters help you?
> **A Grandfather (from the southern area):** Yes. I have three daughters. I live for them, and now, when I am ill they look after me. Every month, I spare 70 leva for the doctor and separately around 40 leva for my wife's doctor. She's suffering from depression. We live poverty stricken.

The elderly also remarked that low pensions resulted in a lack or inability to purchase significant material goods. This contributed to narratives that "life is hard." Many elders made their pensions stretch, and as the next story will show, some elders were "grateful" to have some money to economize at all. In addition, some older adults did not rely on family for their support, and in making their pensions stretch they remained independent and resourceful.

The same day we interviewed the grandfather in the Small Village near to the Southern Town, my guide, the village mayor, and I spoke to other elders there. A 65-year-old grandmother and widower explained how she spent her time as a pensioner:

> **A Grandmother (from the southern area):** I do everything.
> **Guide (from the south):** What do you do during a normal workday, I do not mean on a holiday or if there is a special event? In an ordinary day, what does a pensioner do?
> **A Grandmother:** Well, we go to work in the field, cook, and generally that's our job. Now I'm retired and I do not go to government jobs. I am grateful to receive a pension.

When we asked her how she used the pension she received, she too noted that a large part of it went to medications. And while she had family located in the Southern Town, living with her, and working abroad she said that the pension was what she used for her personal upkeep.

> **Guide (from the south):** Last question, can you tell us how you use the pension you receive?

A Grandmother (from the southern area): Well, I buy food, pay people who do certain services for me. I buy medicine. For these things. And it is good that I receive a pension.
Guide: Is the pension enough for your needs?
A Grandmother: Well, if I pay electricity, water. Enough (stop). There is nothing left for other things, but I'm grateful that I receive, because without it it's worse.
Guide: Well, then somebody is helping you?
Mayor: I guess her son.
Grandmother: A no, no. [X] should earn for himself. I have my pension. It does not suffice but whatever it is that's it.
Guide: Are you alone?
Grandmother: Yes, I'm alone and the pension I receive is only for my upkeep. A large amount is spent on medication.
Guide: How much?
A Grandmother: Around 20-30 leva.
Mayor: Around 20-30 leva. Are these blood pressure medicines?
Grandmother: Yes, for blood pressure and other pains.

She also noted that she used to have a lot of things in life, but that now there wasn't money for things and life had changed.

A Grandmother (from the southern area): Yes, before we allowed ourselves and had a lot of things, and now it's not like that.
Mayor: Are you saying that there isn't money?
A Grandmother: Yes, there's no money.
Guide (from the south): Well then her husband contributed. Now he is not among the living.
Grandmother: Well! It's not exactly like that. He received a pension – 75 leva. He wasn't healthy.
Guide: So, did your husband work at that time?
Mayor: Yes, he was working, as a driver, and as an in-keeper [word used traditionally to refer to a bartender in a local pub where rooms may be rented]… he worked for some time in the mines. He was a popular man. Hospitable. Whoever came as a guest to the house would have thought that he was an in-keeper.
A Grandmother: He loved guests. He was hosting a lot of people.

This grandmother's narrative depicts an active pensioner making-do with the pension she receives. It also paints the picture of an independent, resourceful, and adaptive older adult who describes other pensioners ("we") in the same light. She also struggled with high blood pressure, used to have money, and fondly remembered her husband and his past. However, she was grateful

for the pension that she did receive, stating that things could be worse without it. In essence, she wasn't complaining.

In another case, a 79-year-old uncle also said that he couldn't complain when we asked him about his and his wife's (78 years old) personal life:

> **The Uncle (from the southern area):** What to say. Here on the border [we] live a little difficult. Life is complicated. Now [they] dropped these restrictions and we can pass freely in the neighboring country. That's what I can think of now.
> **Guide (from the south):** And in a personal aspect. Here in the village? How do you live, how do you feel?
> **The Uncle**: All right, so-so. I can't complain. Good. A little sad to see the other villages, they burn, demolish, crumble. It is hard and insulting for me.
> **Guide**: Listen to me! You and your wife how are you?
> **The Uncle:** My wife and I, are better now. We are not in good health, but overall we're fine. Normal. We move around. We are still on our feet.

This uncle's response first offered commentary about his environment – change had occurred and previous restrictions to borders (and people) had been lifted. Open borders meant free passage and, as discussed in previous chapters, mobility. Pressing further, the uncle noted that he felt alright and couldn't complain, though he highlighted that change (crumbling and demolished villages) in the landscape around him was insulting. Physically though, and one can offer whether also metaphorically, the uncle and his wife were still standing.

Like the first grandfather we met in the village, we learned that this uncle had worked in the mines for 16 years prior to retirement. He had been retired since 1985 and noted that the remainder of his working years had been above ground. His wife, on the other hand, had worked in agriculture and child care. She had only five years of employment, and received a disability pension. Also like the gentleman at the beginning of the chapter, this uncle noted that pensions were not enough despite the couple's combined sum:

> **Guide (from the south):** Good. Ok, are the pensions sufficient?
> **The Uncle (from the southern area):** For myself I can say that what I get is enough, but my wife is different. Her pension is small. It is insufficient.

Guide: Well, aren't you together?
…
The Uncle: We are together.
Guide: Do you live alone? Or are there children living with you here?
The Uncle: Grandchildren live with us.
Guide: Grandchildren?! Where?
The Uncle: In the next room?
Guide: How old are your grandchildren?
Uncle: Nearly 40 years old.

While the uncle and his wife had adult grandchildren living with them in the Small Village near the Southern Town, they also had five grown children of their own who lived nearby. Most were married with their own families, and one was in another village taking care of "his grandmother and grandfather" (his wife's parents).

Finally, when we asked him what he and his wife did as pensioners during the day, they responded with rhetorical questions:

Guide (from the south): What do you do during the day? On an ordinary day from morning to night, what do you do?
The Uncle (from the southern area): What should we do? Nothing. Here, there. What is there to do, we can no longer work. We are old, sick.
Uncle's Wife (from the southern area): We lie, resting.
The Uncle: We rest.

Though the grandfather noted at the beginning of the discussion that he couldn't complain, answering "What should we do?" implied acquiescence to certain facets of life. In fact, there was almost a sense of fatalism to it. Pressed further, however we learned that the uncle met friends to play cards at one of the village's two cafés. His wife tended to stay home and insisted that she didn't socialize, though she did have a sister who frequently paid her visits. This couple was indeed still on their feet, and their parting words to us that day were that the most important consideration for life as a pensioner was, first and foremost, being healthy:

> **Guide (from the south):** What is for you at this moment the most important? Now as pensioners, at this age, what is the most important thing in your life?
> **The Uncle (from the southern area):** Well, it is obvious! Health is the most important, but it is not always like that. On the first place is the good health of a person.

Strategizing Living around the Three-Pillar Retirement System

When talking about how life was hard economically and with small pensions, many elders referred to Bulgaria's three-pillared retirement system and the different categories of pensioners affected by it. Often times, this discourse criticized and emphasized hardships within the retirement system. The system was introduced in 2000 and included changes such as raising the retirement age from 63 to 65 for men, and from 60 to 63 for women by 2017 (World Bank 2013: xvii; Andreeva 2009:135).[103] The pillars are currently organized by 1) a "mandatory defined-benefit" that is "pay-as-you-go," 2) one that is fully-funded and mandatory, and 3) the last is also fully-funded yet voluntary (World Bank 2013:58). The scheme is also based on the number of years a person has worked as well as age (37 years for women and 40 years for men) (xvii).

While one grandfather explained that his situation was similar to the rest of the pensioners living in the Small Village near to the Southern Town, other elderly noted that different groups of pensioners existed based on the retirement system and so some people lived better than others. During interviews in the Southern Town, for example, the elderly explained that talking about the pension system meant talking about it in reference to categories and professions. One grandfather who I spoke with while having coffee at an outdoor pub answered that life as a pensioner depended on the pensions tied to these categories. The grandfather mentioned that the highest categories of pensions were for those who had worked in the mines and underground. When I asked him if the

[103] The new retirement system in Bulgaria was introduced through a series of changes starting in 2000 which included raising the retirement age by four months starting in 2012 until desired outcomes were reached by 2017 resulting in a retirement age increase of 2 years for men and 3 years for women (World Bank 2013: xvii; Andreeva 2009:135).

pensions they received were much higher than others, he answered, "Yes, as miners they receive over 500-600 leva pensions, even 700 leva." He explained that the next categories, which included those who had been officials or even the police, actually received less pensions. Wondering who might receive lower pensions, I asked the grandfather about other professions such as a cook. He confirmed that the profession would fall into a lower pay scheme.

The grandfather also noted that he received a good pension, but not because he was miner. It was because he had worked abroad in the Soviet Union. In fact, he noted that he would normally not have received a high pension had it not been for his work abroad. Living at the time with his wife (a former teacher) in the Southern Town, he said they both received decent pensions. They also had family near and with whom they shared reciprocal ties:

> **A Grandfather (from the south):** …I get a good pension, my wife was a teacher and she gets a good pension.
> **Lisa:** OK.
> **A Grandfather:** We are only two [together]. The children don't come to us [meaning they don't come to them economically].
> **Lisa**: Yes. Super. This is best.
> **A Grandfather:** So instead, we help them. They help us sometimes.

While this grandfather and I were talking, another pensioner joined our conversation. Referring to some of the lowest pensions, he mentioned that people were expected to make ends meet (or "tie both ends") on 100-150 leva and added that people were "exhausted." The grandfather I had been talking to added that he could tell me one more thing about life in Bulgaria:

> **A Grandfather (from the south):** I'll tell you one thing about it here in Bulgaria. Here in Bulgaria, the rich people.
> **Lisa**:?!
> **A Grandfather**: The rich people don't love the people.
> **Lisa:** Rich people are not loved by the people.
> **A Grandfather**: While in America and other countries very rich people value them.
> **Lisa**: Yes.
> **A Grandfather**: Because they help a lot of poor people.

What he was saying was that the poor didn't receive help from the rich.

Another elderly uncle I met in the Southern Town echoed similar narratives about pensions and their categories. As he launched into the subject, however, he gave it a contextual background – that of before democracy which he noted wasn't democracy. Using qualifiers such as "*sevdo-democracia*" (pseudo-democracy), the conversation was charged with discontent towards the administration regarding pensions and practices.

Harkening back to tales that elders recounted with their nostalgia, this uncle stated that life had been great under socialism because a majority of people lived well. There was a small percentage who hadn't lived well, but he implied that the case was now reversed. I questioned him as to whether he meant that everyone lived well (young and old) in the past. He agreed and referenced (as many others I spoke with did) current problems with unemployment, thefts, and other social ills. For example, he said there wasn't work in the Southern Town (although there was a small clothing/textile industry and tourism), and people were abroad in England, Spain, or Germany. He noted that during the time when the mining industry was strong, there was a lot of activity and more money.

He also talked about people who lived with different pension amounts and categories. When I spoke to the elderly, different pension amounts came up rounding into categories around 150, 300, and 500 leva a month (130 and 700 were the lowest and highest estimates). Speaking to this uncle, the first category resulted in difficulties paying bills.[104] To emphasize the difficulty, he mentioned that this category could pay water and electricity bills but then live on eating bread, onion, and salt. In addition, he noted it was difficult to buy medications and "nobody helps." When

[104] How could someone at the lower pension end pay their electricity bill when my own, for example, was often over 100 leva?

asked whether there were social services, he said there was help for the unemployed (unemployment services). There was help for pensioners for electricity but not water. To all this, he complained, there was a banana republic, economic (and other) difficulties, and ultimately a pensioner "genocide" going on.

Strategizing as Pensioners

Referring to the issues affecting pensioners as part of a "genocide" was one uncle's commentary on the economic forces that acted against some elders' survival. These economic difficulties are compounded by the country's extreme demographic issues. A main hypothesis for the current work is that the greatest stress to Bulgarian elders' lives is the risk of dwindling interpersonal relationships (which includes the support these ties bring). This risk was echoed by a visiting grandson who visited the depopulating Northwestern Village one day. "I have a suggestion [for] the whole western world to bring their pensioners in Bulgaria," he said, "so that it becomes a small pensioners' country." An interesting statement,[105] one could argue that bringing the elderly all together might sustain the country and take care of some of its demographic problems – at least temporarily and until the elderly (and the country with it) died out.

As the aging population increases in Bulgaria, many people note that the elderly make up a marginal and vulnerable population. Despite the pillar organization, for example, a recent World Bank report noted that the retirement system in Bulgaria is not "self-sustaining," relies "significantly" on the state which funds social insurance through taxation, and had low employee/employer contribution (53% in 2011) (2013:61). The report further noted that given the

[105] There are several interesting interpretations for this statement. Many elders actually hoped that Westerners would come to the country to buy village homes and create retirement-communities. Like a cargo cult awaiting riches, these elders thought the British (known to have migrated to countries like Spain for retirement) might revitalize the landscape. The statement is also interesting in that it offers a reverse scenario to the many youth depleting rural areas for western countries as they search for work.

country's unemployment rate, poverty level, growing aging population, and demographic trends the retirement system will have to adapt (58).[106] It would also seem that the elderly will further need to adapt to be able to adjust to such unsettling scenarios.

But how does a "vulnerable" or "marginal" group strategize economic survival and well-being? During my time in Bulgaria I witnessed a variety of strategies that the elderly used such as sharing health tips, medications, and bio-products; harvesting vegetables and fruits from subsistence garden plots; or seeking out comfort, support, and resources from those in similar situations or from neighbors, family, and even beyond. These methods incorporated an important element in supporting the elderly's well-being in Bulgaria – the continued reliance, value, and permutations of relationships and social networks. As the mayor in the Small Village near to the Southern Town noted when explaining his responsibilities towards the elderly, those with these networks (especially intergenerational networks) relied on them:

> See now. Regarding the elderly, I try to help them in whatever ways I can. On the one hand with administrative assistance, so that they don't have any trouble; and the other where necessary, I use my powers, for example in the municipality [of the Southern Town] because older people do not understand. I help them with their personal needs; we go together to the administrative services of the municipality. If there is a possibility that the person not to have to come physically to the administration – because you know how an 80-year-old man is – one example, I gathered here locally in the village the taxes, all taxes, even if the property is not here. I say: "Come, tell me your PIN, give me your personal information and I will pay your personal holdings." I try to make their life easier in this way. I help them out with the social services. People who receive social assistance for heating fuel or free heating fuel, I fill out the documents and present them to the appropriate officials. I issue the proxies, with which the authorized people, sons and daughters are able to receive their funds. This is a benefit for the elderly. And in this way I save them the costs if they would personally travel to visit the municipality. This is possible in families where there are younger members, but there are those who do not have a young family, and there

[106] The Bulgarian pension system, like many in Europe, will have to adjust to these adverse demographic developments. Spending cuts can be achieved either by reducing the number of beneficiaries through tighter eligibility criteria, decreasing the generosity of benefits, or shortening the length of time benefits are given (World Bank 2013: 58).

are some cases that I am asked to help. In fact, in this aspect, my work is geared towards elderly.

Summary

Despite the above stressors and risks, the larger group of elderly in Bulgaria identify as pensioners who respond to their economic situations along categories based on pension income, former occupations, and the retirement system's hierarchy. The majority of elderly across the country received the lower end of the pension scale, they said, and struggled. Those at the higher end of the scale (particularly miners) recognized that their lives were more manageable on the pensions they received, but they still had to negotiate health costs and a living standard. And, despite the different categories, most elderly noted that pensioners in their specific areas shared similar experiences and difficulties.

To negotiate and manage these difficulties, some elders talked about relying on trusted relationships, such as family members who provided reciprocal exchange and support. However, for some people access was limited because family members were far or away. Moreover, some elders mentioned that they didn't engage in economic exchange or interactions with family members, or that they were the ones providing for adult children's support. This represented both permutations and change to traditional interpersonal relationships which used to offer the elderly economic support through mutual intergenerational ties.

The following chapters explore how the elderly sustain interpersonal relationships, social, and personal well-being. They also highlight continuities and shifts to elders' interpersonal networks, their valued networks and traditional practices, and the engagement and innovation they create as they age in place.

Part III

CHAPTER 7

Pensioners' Clubs, Coffee-Time, and Neighbor Networks
Places for Peer Interaction and Company

This chapter extends a look at the elderly's memberships in and use of interpersonal relationships. It concentrates on three spaces where the elderly I met engaged in peer interactions for well-being – pensioners' clubs, topographies of coffee-time, and neighbor networks.

Concerning pensioners' clubs, the chapter examines how some groups of elders in Bulgaria used clubs to create space away from forces examined previously and to respond to them.[107] They were also places where people could draw from repertoires of experiences with issues the members faced (individually and together) almost every day. Exploring such clubs contributes to avenues for looking at "agency" "for the elderly by the elderly" (Tsuji 2009).

The chapter further looks at peer interactions among elderly as they are practiced in a different space – topographies of coffee time to examine additional places where the elderly relate with each other and in relationship to processes affecting them such as globalization and out-migration. It also explores three instances where the elderly I met actively created and engaged with aging in their places for sociability and care: an aunt's downstairs room and a sidewalk "political café" in the Southern Town, and backyard coffee-time between neighbors in the Northwestern Village.

Also, highlighting the importance of care, the chapter illustrates how "*kumshia*" (neighbors) offer networks of company and support to some of the Bulgarian elderly I met. These networks aided the elderly in negotiating stress, in providing a helping hand when needed, and in

[107] Work on aging, community studies, and life satisfaction has looked toward the history of places such as senior centers, volunteer associations, retirement communities, and others that can be placed alongside pensioners' clubs. Reasons for examining these places have included value people derive from their inclusiveness, trends and differences within "homogeneous" or "heterogeneous" cohorts, and for topics on active aging, well-being, and quality of life.

creating spaces for neighborly interactions. In addition, reliance on neighbors often stemmed from proximity and necessity, especially for elderly individuals aging together away from their family members and in ways that some had experienced differently in the past. This does not mean, as the next chapter will show, that extended family has lost its role for the elderly or vice versa.[108]

What is a Pensioners' Club?

As mentioned earlier, pensioners' clubs in Bulgaria are investments that the elderly, or those associated with them, make in order to form a place of their own.[109] One day in February 2013, a friend and guide in the Southern Town called me to tell me exciting news. He had arranged for me to go with him to one of the town's two pensioners' clubs. He noted that I would have to clear whatever plans I had because this was a rare opportunity. Pensioners' clubs were male-only in the Southern Town. In fact, he noted that I would be the first woman to go there.[110]

The Pensioners' Club was located across a river that ran down the center of town. My friend explained to me that pensioners (including those who worked part time or had shops) would go there because they may be at home, without kids, or alone. Furthermore, as the area was involved in mining, he noted that half of the men had good pensions (a range he noted from 350 leva to 700 leva a month). He indicated that this meant a better life for those retired in little towns,

[108] Observations suggest some shifts or adaptations to the family corporate unit as it would have traditionally functioned if it were still located in place, though family remains the core network for elders' salient support.

[109] As Tsuji (2009) noted in a study of a senior center in the United States, and mentioned earlier in the chapter, pensioners' clubs can be considered places that are recognized and which exist "for the elderly, by the elderly."

[110] The Pensioners' Club in the Southern Town was strictly male-only membership, female friends and family were not allowed. My access to it was a one-shot deal and it was considered highly unusual for me to be there for a visit. In order to document the experience of a "one-shot case study," the chapter weaves detailed field notes into the narrative and as closely as possible so as to capture the moment in all its bustle and conversational flow. Given that the opportunity was a one-shot case study, however, limitations exist. My presence among men, for example, may have influenced how the group of men acted and what they said. Nevertheless, the event consists of themes that 1) would be acceptable in my presence and 2) which reflect key sustained tenets Simić (1977) noted would continue to be important in the region and in the face of disengagement theory, aging, modernity, and other stressors. These include the highlighted importance of interpersonal relations and networking that took place in the past, present, and foreseen future.

especially if wives also received a bit of money. And finally, he mentioned that clubs offered food, heating, and socialization which was important to stave off winter's monotony. These clubs offered welcomed company for people who shared similar life experiences.

A Gathering of Men in the Southern Town – Peer Membership and Activities in the Pensioners' Club

"We are neighbors"

The Pensioners' Club in the Southern Town was a large building that looked like a winter lodge. I learned that it was community based and community run. It had a warm fireplace in the center of a room with a capacity for more than 20 people, a television, and a clamor of activity. Tables could seat around 9 or 10 people, and when joining one large group I was told that they were all from the town and were neighbors, cousins, or former schoolmates. Many of the people had also gone together to the nearest city (e.g. after school days or for work), or had worked in the textile factory or mines. Their employment together meant a shared conception of the past and present space. One significant example is the shared experience of former miners.

My friend explained the significance of mining in people's lives in the particular place, and region of the Southern Town. The mines had been a force of production under socialism, he said. However, the partial demise and privatization of the industry (after socialism's collapse) caused the area and its people much shock such as massive unemployment, insecurity, and migration to search for work (see Ghodsee's 2010 work). Nevertheless, the Southern Town managed to do quite well with a heavier population of around 7000 people and larger villages in the area.[111]

[111] The Northwestern Village had also once been populated with miners. Production, however, had been at a distance and the people had transitioned from working with agriculture and livestock to mines. Without work, and returning to the fields for subsistence farming, the Northwestern Village struggled with sustaining itself despite some former miners having higher pensions. When a few people did mention the mines, it often was in context of the comradery they had felt as well as the hard work. Unlike the socialization among peers at the Pensioners' Club, the Northwestern Village had no such large association.

While former miners and other gentlemen at the Pensioners' Club had some money to spend, they were not extravagant. As the only woman sitting in the club, I took stock of my surroundings. There were 8 tables packed with men talking or playing cards. The TV was on in the background and music was playing. Friends were drinking "*rakia*" (usually a homemade liquor close to "fire water" or "moonshine"), water, and soda. My evening comrade mentioned that a lot of the men would bring sausages, grilled meat, and drink from home or outside.

A Room of Pensioners with Family Abroad

The eating and conversation continued. Topics were heavy with politics, economics, and the cost of pensions. They even became heated between those with dissenting opinions. Moods could quickly be diffused, and when a close friend to mine came to sit with us, the jolliness and joking began. He told me more details about the men there and their relationships, extending them to what families mean and how people relate between towns.[112]

The gentleman continued to discuss relationships and peer membership. Not only was everyone connected somehow by past school days, employment, or proximity, but they also shared common experiences in the present. For example, I was told that everyone in the room had someone from their family living abroad. These missed family members were away physically but not completely absent as there were shared ways of communication that connected sons, daughters-in-laws, and grandchildren such as Skype, telephone, and GSM. However, I learned that the standard and preferred way of staying in touch was the landline (see Chapter 8).

Listening to how people had families abroad and how they communicated, I continued to take note of practices around me. Some of the men at the table were watching my conversation and would join in to socialize even more. The socializing involved disputing and arguing in

[112] Before he began, however, he showed me a match box with dice in it. He had somewhat hidden it under the table as if it were taboo for me to see. This added a bit of flare to the games that were going on around me.

comradery about sports, debates, current affairs, and the energy situation in Bulgaria. Everyone seemed to be coming together to share something to eat or drink. There was a constant bustle with some people staying and others leaving. There were even some who, when they left, offered to "*cherpi*" (treat or pay for) a few of those staying behind.

Interpersonal Relationships and Religions

Discussion on relationships turned away from family and toward the men's various religions both within the town and around it. The region shared three dominant groups – Bulgarian Orthodox Christian, Bulgarian Muslims, and ethnic Turkish. Many people in the Southern Town were quick to mention that the two Bulgarian groups there (Bulgarian Orthodox Christian and Bulgarian Muslim) coexisted peacefully. A common phrase I often heard was that they were metaphorically "brothers and sisters."

The same was implied this night as the topic of interpersonal relationships and religions was explained to me. I was told that there was no difference in treatment between individuals. I had come to realize, however, that a few predominantly Muslim areas were viewed as separate. Some people, for example, pointed to one place in particular where they perceived a different Islamic presence had come during "democracy," and which they perceived had altered relationships or practices with religion inside their area of Bulgaria and as affected from outside influences (see Ghodsee 2010 for further exploration on people's Islamic practices, outside influences, and agency in the area).[113]

Despite this and differing traditions among the groups in the Southern Town (for example a bell ringing for a Bulgarian Orthodox death or an imam singing for a Bulgarian Muslim's

[113] While not the current study's focus, Ghodsee unpacks people's "locally defined reasons" for turning to "new forms of Islam" in that area, and as meaningful and purposeful responses to the economic, historical, political, and global forces in their lives (2010:5).

passing), I was told that people got along. In the Pensioners' Club, I could not distinguish what religion was being followed among men. All that seemed to matter was that those playing cards and talking were together and engaged in interacting within the place and with processes outside of it such as talking about and adapting to their children's economically driven out-migration

Making Networks

Other networks were also approached that night. By the end of the evening, other men at the table had joined in and began to joke about co-opting me into their group. One gentleman, for example, wanted to talk to me about having visited California because one of his children had moved there. Did I know the place, he asked me when telling me about the town. Of course I did, I had grown up within its region! How small the world was!

And while the world was small, it didn't mean that it was limiting. It was full of possibilities as one elderly gentleman seemingly suggested. Sitting at the table with me he noted that he had a son about my age. This brought the men amusement and they began to joke about a possible matchmaking. The elderly man with the son thought it unlikely, however, because his son was in England. That didn't matter, one of his friends noted, "Love has no borders!"

Pensioners' Clubs that "Other" and Other Clubs

My visit to the Pensioners' Club in the Southern Town caused talk. One day, while at a local restaurant, the same friend who had taken me to the Pensioners' Club and I stepped outside for some fresh air. A woman that my friend knew came to say hello and noted that she had heard I had been to the all-male Pensioners' Club. I later learned that others were talking about my visit with amazement and humor. Most importantly there was recognition that the pensioners' clubs in the town were gender specific and excluded women.

Curiosity about my visit aside, not everyone was interested in the clubs. One day in May 2013, a woman living near my apartment block in the Southern Town approached me and offered to prepare coffee for me at her house. She had heard from another neighbor about my research, and was curious to chat as well as to know what my study would bring to people in the immediate context. “What can they do in the US,” she asked me and “who is interested?”

A former teacher of 30 years with family hours away in a nearby city and who was living alone in a house needing repair, this 67-year-old aunt and pensioner had left Bulgaria for Greece to care for an elderly woman but returned when her own mother’s health failed. Among the many topics we talked about, was her belief that the important aspects of life, particularly for youth, were to enjoy it through such things as loving life, sea, nature, and coffee. I asked the aunt what social activities she thought existed for pensioners. She mentioned the pensioners’ clubs. Probing further, I told her that I had seen only men go to the ones in the Southern Town and she explained her opinion that the club was closed. She also expressed that it was not only closed to certain people (in this case women), but also by a certain lack of open-mindedness.

To explain what she meant by this, she discussed “culture” in a way that could be interpreted as her ideas on “cultured” thoughts or behaviors. For example, when this aunt went out she liked to get dressed up and to put on make-up. She pointed to her mouth to indicate lipstick and asked me if there was anything wrong with wanting such a thing? Using the qualifier “they” for men at pensioners’ clubs in the Southern Town, she noted that the men would think that she was looking for a man. This was something which she thought was part of a thought process that would occur at the basest of levels for some of the men.

Instead, there were other pensioners’ clubs where there were engineers or doctors, she noted. These could be found in another town where men and women mingled more readily together

in clubs. In the Southern Town, she noted that the Pensioners' Club population wouldn't consider that some like to put on lipstick and others not. Again, she stressed her view that "they" thought such women were looking for men. This aunt's narrative placed the Pensioners' Club members within the town as "others" who differed from her needs and interests according to gender and outlook. By the same token, the male club members also "othered" people by excluding women from the clubs.

An Egg Storage Turned Pensioners' Club in the Northwestern Village

In August 2010, I made a return visit to the Northwestern Village and ran across 57-year-old Auntie. Auntie was an active member of the community. I had met her two years before and shared coffee one afternoon with her and her neighbors. I had noted then that the small neighborhood network that Auntie and her neighbors maintained each weekend created an oasis of social respite from the weekly loneliness found on the village's abandoned street. This time around, Auntie and others had done more to combat that loneliness. They had created a pensioners' club.

I ran into Auntie again while I was having coffee outside in the yard where I was staying. She walked by the house waving hello and entered momentarily. She invited me to see the pensioners' club where she had worked every day and which had not existed two years earlier.

The next morning, at around 10 o'clock, I ventured to visit the pensioners' club. Auntie was outside the club, a small one room building located in the middle of the village which had not been a center of activity before. She was helping pull up some weeds by a bench.[114] Asking Auntie

[114] I recalled the area from my last visit and that in 2008 an elderly man had lived in a house across from this new pensioners' club. He had been relatively alone. The village mayor had been helping provide for him through municipal funds, and made sure soup was delivered to him when the bread truck came. I wasn't sure what his status was during this visit, but the house looked abandoned.

what the club's story was, she mentioned that it was started by the village mayor and another mayor from the central town where municipal matters took place. They had come and asked the villagers what they wanted including whether they wanted a pensioners' club. Auntie showed me the room where there was a table to play chess or dames. The walls had two photos of the villagers' previous spring balls, a tradition that many looked forward to and one of the few events that opened the usually locked "cultural center." [115] As the club had only been around for two years, the last two years' ball portraits were on the wall.

The club was decorated with what Auntie and the mayor could use to renovate the building. Material objects included a small TV, a table by a window where two visiting children eventually came to play and listen to Auntie and I talk. Chairs were lined up along the wall, as I had seen them lined up before in the former cultural center. The lined-up chairs offered the dwindling population as much space as possible in the tiny room. Auntie said that people could come to the pensioners' club and drink coffee or tea. They could play chess or read from the pensioners' paper too.

As we looked over items, our conversation turned to the photos of the spring ball and the other community building (the cultural center) used for people to gather. There, people could come together for the 14th of February, a holiday in Bulgaria to celebrate pruning the grape vines in preparation of wine harvesting to come. They could equally celebrate Orthodox Easter or other holidays (either with live musicians, when possible, or with a cassette player).

[115] The "cultural center" was the village's "*chitalishte*." As Kaneff (2006) notes, the "*chitalishte*" in Bulgarian villages was an important state-sponsored space and an arena for cultural/educational, historical, and political activities. It was also a space, she notes, where the Communist Party had previously exhibited influence on these activities (Kaneff 2006:61).

The spring ball was the belle of balls. Auntie started going over the photos in detail and I could see that the people had an orchestra come from the main town.[116] Villagers wore traditional dresses which Auntie noted were the nicest in the region. She didn't know why that was the case.[117] I could also see from the photos that family had come to the event including granddaughters and adult daughters – such as the mayor's. During my previous visit, some villagers spoke about the ball as a highlight of their year, while others mentioned missing musicians who used to be paid to come to the village on Sundays so that the community could dance and socialize. The pensioners' club offered a small token of compromise between the annual event and a desire for a place for interpersonal connection. It was a resilient attempt to adapt to present situations, and it created a positive outcome for aspects of well-being. It was also a product of some people's initiatives and innovation.

Since I remembered that the building was closed (or thought it had been empty during my last trip to the Northwestern Village) I asked Auntie what the pensioners' club had been before its transformation. She told me that it had eggs stored in it and that it had needed a lot of renovating. "Little by little" she and the mayor (without additional help, she added) took care of that. This was evident in that the building had been repainted and flowers were planted outside. As for the club's availability, it operated from about 8am to about 12:30 the day I was visiting, and again in the afternoon from about 2pm to 4pm.[118]

[116] Because a small orchestra had been brought into the ball, I asked Auntie if it took a lot of money to organize these parties. She answered that that it did and explained that the head municipal town distributed the money for each village. For the spring ball, 30 leva went to the musicians.

[117] I suggested that the villagers may keep them well preserved, as was my experience from my previous visit when villagers wanted to show me their dresses. At that time, they would take out woolen pleated skirts and aprons, long cotton dresses, and shirts that had been wrapped, tied into bundles, and dusted with moth protection. These dresses were coveted and shared at the spring ball contests comparing the best dressed.

[118] I had to wonder if anyone went during the later afternoon time as most of the elderly were usually napping. I also thought that the morning time might be for those individuals not working in the fields.

Nearing the end of this pensioners' club visit, the mayor stopped by and revisited my plans and projects as an anthropologist in Bulgaria. Once again, as years before, I asked Auntie about the village's projected fate. She did not think that many of the young people wanted to come back since most of them, such as with her own family, had moved elsewhere or abroad.[119] The news was neither surprising nor dampening. In fact, I felt somewhat reassured that the creation of a small pensioners' club was a sign of strategizing and coping; a place where people could engage together in their family members' absences. They could even communicate about better times when generations came together for the spring balls pictured on the pensioners' club's wall.

Baba's Coffee – The Social Life of Coffee among Elderly and Spaces[120]

Other places where the elderly I met interacted for well-being included spaces to spend time over a cup of coffee. When I traveled to the Northwestern Village in 2008, I kept track of how many cafés, banks, and playgrounds I spotted in the nearby city where I felt there was an unusually high number of coffee spots. In just about a two mile stretch I counted, 10 full cafés, 7 open but empty cafés, and 8 closed cafés. There was a total of 34 cafés, 6 banks, and 5 playgrounds.

The clients frequenting these places also caught my attention. Young and old consumed coffee at all hours and I wondered why. Was this because of high unemployment in the area? If there were no jobs, why was there money for coffee? Was there anything else to do? When I asked people these questions many laughed to confirm that there was indeed nothing else to do in the town. Some remarked that they too wondered where the spending money came from. Other people

[119] Family members that do come back often do so for weekend visits. Otherwise, it might be too far and too expensive for some to frequently travel there. The mayor also noted that people wanted to go elsewhere on vacations such as to the beach.

[120] An early version of this chapter was first presented in Chicago as a paper for the November 2013 conference "Aging and Society: An Interdisciplinary Conference." The title of that paper presentation was "Baba's Café: The Social Life of Coffee among Elderly and Spaces in Bulgaria" (Le Fevre 2013 [unpublished]). I am grateful to the organizers for granting me both an AGE Graduate Scholar Award and an opportunity to attend their event, which further helped me develop and extend ideas herein.

even negatively viewed coffee consumption as a waste of time and resources. A new question emerged. To whom did a café cater and why?

The city café culture was something some people criticized because they saw places and practices where unemployment had resulted in idleness, for example, or where people spent what little money they had. But in the rural village landscapes where coffee time occurred, especially for the elderly, this culture often meant social moments with family, neighbors, and this anthropologist. In a "dying village" coffee time for the elderly meant constructing topographies of spaces where coping occurred, resiliency reigned, and social activity sustained a sense of well-being.

Borrowing a term used in Stephen Katz's (2009) sketch of new retirement communities ("elderscapes") as topographies[121] or as "a social topography of spaces of age" (463, 381 and Sokolovsky 2009: xxiii), I explore coffee-times and their venues as significant places used and created by the elderly within their landscape. Looking at "elderscapes," Katz linked examinations of "mobility, residence, and community" to where elders retire and how they create "cultural spaces of retirement" (2009:463). Key issues that he explored at such sites located in Florida, focused on providing vignettes of migration retirement's complexities and dynamics, and of "global processes whereby technologies, networks, and populations are identified by their movements across geo-social spaces rather than by their locations within them" (463-464).

Scholars recently have looked at "elderscapes" as spaces to investigate elders' use of technology, mobilization and activities in cities, or interactions with each other in cross-cultural locations (see for example Danely 2015; see Mayer and Mandoki's project "Elderscapes" online). Sokolovsky highlights the importance of such endeavors for their explorations of "new cultural

[121] Katz has looked at "elderscapes" as "topographies" for aging particularly within retirement communities as "social worlds" (2009 in Sokolovsky:463, 465).

spaces created within them [elderscapes]" and as "the continuing engagement of old adults in shaping the very context of their lives" (2009: xxiv also referring to Counts and Counts 2001 in the web book).

While some may argue that sharing coffee in the Balkans (or other areas of the world for that matter) is not necessarily a new or novel cultural practice,[122] it is one that is being sustained among Bulgarian elderly in new ways that adapt to local economic, social, or political process. Concentrating on Bulgarian elders in a village and small town rather than in the city landscape, spaces for coffee-time are also places where elderly create and adapt engagement with each other and in relationship to globalizing, political, or migratory forces around them. Three of those caffeinated coffee-time spaces demonstrate how the elderly are actively creating and engaged with experiences of aging within their places.

In the Southern Town, the exploration includes an aunt's downstairs room and kitchen where neighbors met almost daily, and a sidewalk "political café" where elderly men met to openly talk and joke. An additional space, coffee-time between three neighbors living on a deserted street in the Northwestern Village, drives home the importance of this topography for those needing caffeinated moments of care. Ultimately, an examination of all three places for how they function in the elderly's lives unveils venues and an environmental scan of where sociability, activity, play,

[122] Scholarly and other interests in cafés span a variety of time periods and fields, from early travelogues to recent cultural and pop studies. One theory, Oldenburg's (1999 edition) "third places," has been seminal to these interests since the late 80s. In this popular conception, third places are "homes away from home" where people interact but don't necessarily need to think alike (see Preface). There is group membership but it is informal, and venues can serve as zones for conviviality, for intellectual and political "fora," and even for "home offices" (Oldenburg 1999: see Preface). Importantly, third places exist through interpersonal relationships. In this study, they can apply to those cafés found in village center stores, on the street, or even in multiple neighborhoods across towns and cities. While third place theorizing is pertinent to some of the coffee milieu in this chapter, focusing on topography helps to conceptualize these spaces in a broader framework involving anthropology of the aging, sociology, and gerontology.

and resiliency take place.[123] It also extends cross-cultural explorations of the aging experience and challenges conceptions of the elderly as marginal.

Life is Bitter and the Coffee Should be Sweet

Many elderly in Bulgaria spend winter living in a first-floor room of a two or three story house.[124] The reason for living downstairs is that it is essentially easier, warmer, and more affordable for the elderly during the cold season. During several weeks in February 2013, I took notes on visits I would have sipping coffee with an "aunt" ("Lelia") in her first-floor room in the Southern Town. Lelia's room was inviting and a hub of social activity. There was no need for invitations, especially for me since she joked that she could be like a second mother. Her face would light up when guests came, and I usually found at least two other "old ladies" with her because Lelia was like their "mother" even if they, themselves, were elderly.

One day I knocked on Lelia's door and found her weaving lace. She quickly stopped when she saw me and asked if we should go to the table and have coffee together. Lelia would have what she called coffee for "baba," a weaker version of coffee made from rye in which she sometimes mixed stronger grinds. She made me strong Turkish coffee and asked if I would like sugar to make it less bitter. Before I answered, she heaped two large spoons of sugar in my cup mentioning softly that she had "no mother, no father" and that her sister was far. Knowing that Lelia had a daughter an hour drive away, and a relative living next door, I sensed that there was more meaning to this very sweet drink and her remarks.

[123] The examples in this chapter are only a handful among a much larger topography of coffee-time places and practices within Bulgaria. It is important to note that these landscapes differ among groups of people aging in place within the culture.

[124] First-floor or downstairs rooms offer the elderly convenient spaces for daily activity, warmth, and comfort. In both regions that I visited, these rooms often had a bed or two that also served as seating, a TV, a table, and a small stove area for cooking and heat. The majority of the time, the elderly stayed in these rooms because they provided a one-stop place for quotidian life. See also Scripps 1996 for accounts on how the elderly use constricted spaces.

Sugar in coffee was a theme that frequently came up at Lelia's house. Presented as a saying from village elders, Lelia would smile and chime that, "Life is bitter and the coffee should be sweet." The idiom came up so much, that I asked to record it with Lelia and one of her neighbors who happened to be visiting. I wanted to learn more about what was bitter about life:

> **Lisa:** And so. So, it's done (the coffee). But the coffee is bitter.
> **Lelia's Friend (from the south):** To make life sweet.
> **Lelia (from the south):** No! Life is bitter and the coffee should be sweet.
> **Lisa:** Well, thank you. Are there other thoughts [sayings] like this?
> **Lelia:** Life is hard…
> **Lisa:** Yes?!
> **Lelia:** There is no money. You want to buy things, but there is no money. You want to create a cozy home… nice furniture and other things ... at least the coffee should be sweet!

For Lelia and others like her, one way life was hard was because families and their support had been dislocated across space. This displacement could be due to death (no mother, no father, or no husband in her case) or out-migration. Indeed, life could be sweet but as the old saying went, it was hard.

> **Lelia (from the south):** Your life is sweet, while your coffee – bitter
> **Lisa:** Is this thought [saying] from the past?
> **Lelia:** Yes, it is an old, old saying. Older people, they say this.
> **Lisa:** And what else do older people say?
> **Lelia:** Older people say: "Life is bitter and the coffee should be sweet."

Lelia and her neighborhood friends came together for these chats and moments of creativity as Cohen (see Ewald 2005 on Cohen) may call them. They would cook for each other, check on each other when ill, and use knitting time to make clothes for grandchildren living far away. They helped each other on holidays to make sure that nobody was forgotten and gossiped if someone had stopped visiting, had problems, or was seemingly left out of a network.

I was told that Lelia's coffee room and neighborly visits aligned more with village social practices. Those born in the Rhodope town where we were – a town with a relatively large

population around 7,000 at the time – didn't really cultivate neighbor coffee time as much as people who came from rural environments. Yet the uniqueness of Lelia's coffee room became interesting because I rarely saw such neighborly activity in the rural northwest. In the Northwestern Village, there were few houses where I was told neighbors would get together for coffee. In a community where people said the population was only in its 50s the last time I asked them, relationships were dwindling. Nevertheless, some shared coffee spaces and times existed. In fact, as we shall see later in the chapter, these each could serve as a mini-oasis for rest, camaraderie, and life in abandoned neighborhoods.

The Sidewalk "Political Café"

One spring afternoon in the Southern Town, I sat at a café drinking beer and asked a friend what it may mean to people there to drink coffee. He told me an "anecdote" involving sugar which differed greatly from Lelia's sweet "baba's" drink. In the olden days, he said, if people drank coffee with a lot of sugar it was because they wanted to go to work with energy and "feeling sweet in their stomachs." He explained that taking sweet coffee was a worker's trait, while those in the administration took strong, bitter coffee. He then offered a joke that was sometimes told in the 70s. When people asked how much sugar they wanted in their coffee, they may have asked "with no sugar, some sugar, or like Todor Zhivkov" (the then communist leader).

There was a sidewalk café known in the Southern Town as the "political café." It was a place for bravado, mild arguments, discussions about which party was leading in the parliament, and joking. Retired men gathered there in the morning to take coffee and discuss current issues, often staying for a good part of the day. They ordered espresso or beer, or bought instant coffee from an outside machine.

The "political café" was also a place to see and be seen (see Oosterman 1992 for a discussion on sidewalk cafés). Located outside, tables and chairs were arranged against the wall

so the men could look out into the street. This resulted in their stopping people or beckoning them to come and say hello. In my case, it became a ritualized game to wave at me whenever I took my daily walk. Some men would even yell, "Hello" to me in English as loud as they could. There would be rolling laughter when I would stop to place my hands on my hips and yell, "Well hello!" back.

The "political café" is part of the landscape and topography of coffee-time where mostly retired men congregate for rest and discussion. It is also a place to sustain and cultivate interpersonal relations. As Oosterman writes, "More than a normal public bar, the café offers perfect opportunities to meet accidentally and thus to keep up one's personal network" (1992: 162). Keeping up personal networks has always been important in the Balkans as Andre Simić (1977) noted in his seminal work, particularly with family. Scholars in the area who look at network relationships, however, have examined ways in which networks of family, friends, and neighbors have changed during post-socialist times.

Findings from a study that Hlebec, Hrast, and Kogovšek conducted in Slovenia during post-socialist transition, for example, pointed to a "narrowing of discussion partners" and closer ties with kin (2010:697). Tapping into the literature on network studies, the authors note that discussion partners had tended to be with friends, relatives, or co-workers (702). Other authors note that people limited or mitigated certain types of relations and interactions, such as political discussions, depending on perceptions of trust (see for example Völker and Flap 1997 on trust and neighbor relations in the former GDR during and after communism).

At the political café, just as in Lelia's coffee room and in the Pensioners' Club, the elderly engaged in sustaining relationships for companionship and sociability. They also interacted with each other in ways that adapted to forces or processes around them which showed engagement

with “the very context of their lives” (Sokolovsky 2009:xxiv) – in this case through political discussion with friends in an open public place.

The Value of Backyard Coffee

Returning to settings in the northwest, I first met Auntie (who helped transform the egg shack into a tiny type of pensioners’ club) while interviewing people in the Northwestern Village’s center. At the time, my translator and I were sitting with grandmothers discussing how the village was full of old people when Auntie walked up to us. Introducing herself in front of the others, she jovially invited us to her house the next day to have coffee with her and her neighbors. When we agreed and thanked her she said, “Alright, because here in the village you probably have no place to go... I am old already, but I like to live among young people.”

Auntie was a jolly, active, and vibrant woman who had lived abroad but returned to Bulgaria. Not originally from the Northwestern Village, she stayed there for the quiet and peace it offered her, and had restored her husband’s family house. Across the way from Auntie’s house, were her two neighbors (a daughter and mother team) who she considered friends. My translator noted that the families must have been close because their properties weren’t separated by a fence.

Though we had arrived a day late for coffee and interrupted her work in the potato plot, Auntie greeted us hardily. She beckoned us to a shady backyard spot with an umbrella-covered table and European café–style green chairs. Offering us Greek coffee on the burner, the cake she had made us the day before, and several large glasses of soda, Auntie explained that she cared for her ailing husband who was a village native. Auntie also noted that she didn’t talk to villagers much (because there wasn’t much to talk about) and spent her time working on the house or garden.

As we chatted about the village and her life abroad, the neighbors came over with a pastry dish and sat down. They were welcome and at ease. The younger neighbor (44 years old) worked

in the town but returned on the weekend to see her mother. Periodically during our coffee time visit, the daughter was helping her mother by preparing cherry preserves over an outside fire.

As to the elder neighbor, it turns out that she was Auntie's "*kumitsa*"[125] or wedding witness. This accounted for their close relationship. Auntie explained that her house, the neighbors' house, and one other formed a group. She also noted that she would wait for Fridays, the time when her Kumitsa's daughter would return. During the week, Auntie was bored and filled her time with work.

The afternoon backyard coffee ended in a flurry of activity. Auntie showed us her restoration around the house and garden; her neighbor's daughter returned to working outside with a cauldron full of jam jars; and we left after having 2 bowls of cherry preserve, a shot of home-made liquor, a fresh tomato, and an invite to dinner when Auntie's daughter would be around. We also left after a visit from another neighbor, an 80-year-old grandfather who had just become a great-grandfather and who had just made the announcement to the group of friends. As we congratulated him he thanked us and told us to be "alive and healthy." We returned wishes with Auntie repeating to him, "alive and healthy, did [you] hear that?"

Drawing from this brief coffee group dynamic, I came to realize that each lonely neighborhood in the village could have pockets that form microcosms of well-being for those within them and within the larger village space. Coffee time with Auntie offered a landscape of established interpersonal relationships, optimism, and an oasis of life that was adapting in and proving resilient to an otherwise abandoned neighborhood. It brought the chance for "young

[125] The "*kum*" and "*kumitsa*," best man and best woman, have a special relationship in Bulgarian network relationships. These are friends who become wedding sponsors, as Campbell (1964) noted with Greek traditions, and who have privileges like kin.

people" to visit,[126] and established an escape from boredom. This backyard coffee space also offered some of the village's inhabitants a valued area of respite.

Kumshia Networks – The Importance of Neighbors to the Elderly

Visiting neighbors, such as those who spent backyard coffee time with Auntie in the Southern Town, offer the elderly moments of sociability as well as possible networks of support. Scholars note that exploring neighborhood networks and their effect on the elderly's well-being is a recently new endeavor within gerontology and other similar fields. Neighborhood networks are often looked at through reciprocation and exchange afforded through the interpersonal relations and the social capital that they bring (see for example Walker and Hillel 2007). In dealing with aging studies, they tend to fall within network analysis's purview or community studies, and respond to investigating elements or "topologies of social support" among people as well as their environments.

The final section of this chapter looks at some Bulgarian elders' neighborhood networks and interactions through a similar lens as this more recent literature.[127] It also looks at how continuities and burgeoning shifts in behavior, expectations, and reliance on neighborhood networks occur for and by the elderly in both the Southern Town and the Northwestern Village. Conversations with some elders underscored a weakening and even breakdown of these networks because of demographic, economic, and political change. However, neighborhood networks

[126] In their article about the Bulgarian village and "third age," Kozhuharova and Dobreva (2007:63) mention that the elderly devise ways to compensate "for the lack of normal natural reproduction of the social potential" in places where there are, for example, few youth (e.g. from lack of births). One way that villagers do this, the authors write, is by having "open houses" for children to visit "periodically" and to create "the possibility for seasonal or holiday rejuvenation of the village" (Kozhuharova and Dobreva (2007:63).

[127] Unlike this literature, I did not conduct a network analysis study using surveys or quantifying results. My interpretations are based on qualitative methodology such as interviews with people and participant observation in elders' everyday lives.

continue to be sought, maintained, or are adapted – more so in the Southern Town than in the Northwestern Village – for the companionship and help they offer particularly when family are away, because of proximity, and out of necessity. These neighbor networks are additional avenues for exploring topologies or topographies of cultural spaces and interaction within Bulgarian elders' lives especially for continued instrumental support.[128] They are also paths by which the elderly can strategize and base resiliency.

A Network of Kumshia (Neighbors)

I went to see Lelia one rainy day in the Southern Town at around 3:30 in the afternoon. I had planned the visit to bring her bread, but I also brought a sweet (baklava) to share in whatever session we would have (coffee, food, or chat). When I arrived at the house, I noticed shoes lined up on the doorstep, which was a sign that her neighborhood friends were visiting. Opening the door and calling out to her, Lelia beckoned me to come into her downstairs room. There, I was further welcomed by three women sitting together around Lelia who was working on a small sweater vest for one of the lady's grandsons, an activity that also afforded companionship. The session that day was knitting with a network of neighbors, or "*kumshia*."[129]

Lelia had been expecting me, and after arranging a spot for me to sit, she portioned baklava pieces to her friends. As the baklava went around, two of the neighbors exclaimed that Lelia gave too many pieces. She put them back, still serving her friends, and started to make me my usual strong coffee. When one of the neighbors asked her why I didn't get a baklava piece she joked that I didn't need it. Instead, I needed sweet coffee. We had come to the point where the two of us

[128] See Völker and Flap (1997) for a discussion on neighborly relations and instrumental support. One finding from their study of neighborly relations in the former GDR was that neighbors were important for instrumental support (Völker and Flap 1997:255). See also Roy and Hamilton (1992:281) on instrumental support.

[129] While "*kumshia*" is used for neighbors in some parts of Bulgaria, a friend explained to me that it is a Turkish word adapted into usage. Given that the area I was visiting in the South is close to Turkey and the past history of Turkish occupation, it is not surprising that the word was used.

shared the old saying that established a bond between us – that life is bitter so the coffee should be sweet.

That day's visit was more about knitting lessons and conversations. The women joked with me that Lelia was like their master (or professional) knitter as she knit quickly and often taught them. Because of my presence and burgeoning Bulgarian language skills, talk turned to language and family abroad. One of the neighbors had a son in England and noted that her grandson did not speak Bulgarian, although he knew a few words and phrases. Topics quickly moved to politics, to other friends and neighbors, to how to knit, and to how people's grandchildren were and how they, these three elderly and neighborly friends, were doing.

Although neighbors now, these women all originally came from different areas. The Southern Town was a place they had moved to (usually because of marriage) and some neighbors had worked together.[130] This is important to note because not only were the women neighbors, but they were also friends with shared experiences and pasts (such as wives moving to be with husbands or having worked together). These types of networks can provide socialization and bonding throughout a lifetime. The visits that come with these networks, such as in this case, also keep people from being alone all day if they are elderly (like Lelia).

Elderly Neighbors and Neighborly Elders – Lelia's "Posestrimi"

I was cautioned that Lelia's neighbor visits were somewhat of a special case and part of a "village mentality" where people got together when there was nothing else to do.[131] Therefore,

[130] In their examination of post-socialist neighborly interactions, Völker and Flap (1997) offered a distinction between relationships based on friendship and ones on neighbors. "Relationships with neighbors differ from relationships individuals have with friends, acquaintances, or colleagues," they wrote, "in the sense that it is actually impossible not to have neighbors" (Völker and Flap 1997:243). "Relationships between neighbors have no predefined content," they also noted, "and are almost never a question of an entirely voluntary choice" (243). While this is true, it doesn't preclude that neighbors can't become friends.

[131] In my experience, there was plenty to do in villages as there was constant work particularly in garden plots and fields. Not having anything to do, in this case, can be interpreted as not having as many options for leisurely activities as in a town or city.

they would go door-to-door to visit, talk for an hour or two, and spend free-time socializing.[132] While Lelia keeps this practice alive in the Southern Town, I was told that not everyone does, as many of them have family visits and networks more than neighbors, a subject that will be taken up in the next chapter. Even Lelia herself noted to me on several occasions that not all neighbors come by or are invited.[133]

"*Posestrimi*," however, could be found at Lelia's house. "*Posestrima*" is a phrase that came up when Lelia talked about a friend whom she frequently saw. A close friend of mine explained to me that the term means someone who is a "similar soul," and in its gendered form refers to women who are "buddies" and good friends. These are people within your friendship network or who are very close to you like kin. In Lelia's case, they get together, meet in places like church, and give each other gifts and help. Paired with the word's masculine form "*probratimi*," the association with the Bulgarian words brother and sister becomes more apparent – "*brat*" and "*sistra*." Hence, it wouldn't be a stretch to interpret that Lelia's close friends, those who were her "similar souls," were also like her sisters.[134]

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[132] Lelia's neighborhood visits and talks about "village mentality" refer to the Rhodope region around the Southern Town. It isn't possible to really generalize experiences among neighbors across Bulgarian villages. In the Northwestern Village, for example, people noted a significant change among interactions which they found to be negative. People had become envious, they noted, or "bad." Also, when there had been a lot of people in the village, there were social and evening gatherings that went beyond the door-to-door visit. Now, people in the Northwestern Village had few occasions to do this because there were simply very few people left.

[133] Early scholars on the Balkans, such as those espousing the honor and shame school, took note of the many types of values associated with reciprocal relationships within the region's different groups and cultures. Campbell (1964), for example, noted that relationships in a Greek Sarakatsani community included links and protection through spiritual kin, wedding sponsors (known in Bulgaria as the "*kum*" and "*kumitsa*"), and alliances with village notables. Later literature dealing with various types of socialism in the region examined how reciprocal relationships and the State influenced practices of patronage (see for example Verdery 1996; Burawoy 2000:47 and 1996; or Berdahl 1999; Creed 1998; Kaneff 2006). In both types of literature neighborhood networks could offer a boon or bane. Feuding cousins, for example, wouldn't offer much in the way of reciprocation unless to aid each other through cross-cutting ties and obligations. Neighbors in the socialist period could also gossip, and in extreme cases, serve as informants against each other.

[134] Recalling Campbell (1964) and systems of patronage in Greece, word associations once again become important, particularly with references to "spiritual kin" and the "wedding sponsor". This type of network also exists in Bulgaria with the "*kum*" and "*kumitsa*" or best man and woman. While it is noted that the relationship to these individuals differ from that of a neighbor, both contain the root "*kum*" as is found in "*kumshia.*"

What do neighbors do? What do they do for the elderly?

I noticed a few other traces of the neighborly network at Lelia's house. For example, a neighbor tilled her front and side gardens so that they were ready for planting. While not specific to the elderly, garden plots in Bulgaria provide subsistence farming, an economical and often primary source of fresh and seasonal food, and a source of pride and conviction. Under socialism, scholars note that crops from people's 'private plots' served as a second economy that supplemented people's access to food, provided a way to earn extra money, and undermined the socialist state (through stolen time or goods from the socialist state's production) (Verdery 1996: 27, 52; Creed 1998). Receiving a helping hand in this case meant growing a staple food (onions) that is useful all year round. A neighbor offering a helping hand for an aging Lelia to maintain her garden, also served as a source of sustained personal and social well-being.

Another way that neighborhood networks help the elderly is through the vigilance they provide. I would sometimes notice Lelia peeking out her window at a passerby in the street, trying to see who might be coming over or moving along. This peeking certainly has many meanings and functions. It could mean looking out for friends who might be stopping for a visit, or even calling to them to be social. It could also mean keeping an eye out for someone to avoid.[135]

Friendship and neighborhood networks also provide emotional support in both good and bad times, something that I learned from joining those networks in the field. While not my immediate neighbors, Lelia and her niece[136] extended the importance and utility of friendship and

[135] In an article about technology and global aging, Prendergast et al. (2009:9) note the importance and use of windows in Europe and to the elderly. They describe how the frequently open window of Trini, an elderly widow living in a second story apartment in the South of Spain, served as a conduit of communication for the woman's niece who called to her as a way of "wellness checking" (Prendergast et al. 2009:9). "Monitoring" as in Trini's case (and in other places), the authors note, offers family and the elderly a way to maintain "value" as well as occur in the "midst of other valued social interactions" (Prendergast et al. 2009:10). One can also claim that this watchfulness and calling to others from windows provides essentially a "neighborhood watch."

[136] Lelia was related to her niece by marriage, having been the niece's paternal uncle's wife (a designation that has its own kinship status different from an aunt by blood).

networks to me as I was dealing with my own aging family back in the United States. One day, for example, I received word from my 73-year-old father that he was struggling to adapt the house to my mother's post-stroke needs, to serve as her primary caregiver, and to deal with the care facility, insurance, and administrative matters. Sharing my father's concerns with Lelia's niece, she began to brainstorm for solutions. She asked me, for example, if there were any neighbors who could help to bring food, to clean, and to support. She stressed, after I mentioned the differences in neighborhood relations in the United States, that neighbors were important. It was through them that people survived and continued.

Choosing a Neighborhood Network

If not all neighbors come by or are invited to visit, as Lelia noted for the Southern Town, then in what ways might neighborhood networks occur? While many factors led to neighborhood networks being established among the Bulgarian elderly I met, two are important to highlight. These are people's proximity to each other, which also includes their shared experiences, and necessity.

Proximity and Shared Experiences

Lelia's neighborhood networks in the Southern Town were primarily located on her street or very nearby.[137] As mentioned before, her neighborhood friends came by to knit, exchange food and supplies, have coffee, watch TV, offer companionship, and provide a helping hand. All of these things were made easier by the fact that they lived so close by. As was the case for Lelia, family members sometimes lived nearby as well. While the closest neighbors are not necessarily

[137] Studies on the elderly that look at social or neighborhood networks either for support (e.g. Wenger 1991) or for the significance of place to well-being (Gardner 2011), often refer to proximity as an important relational element. Being close to people in the proximal sense, affords the elderly a sense of safety, for example, or allows for the watchfulness that Prendergast et. al (2009:9) document with Trini. As Wiles and Jayasinha (2013) also note, elderly within a neighborhood can offer "care for place" with "nurturing relationships" towards not only people's well-being but also that of their space (see pg. 98).

supportive (and in some cases, they might cause problems), a caring and helpful neighbor might become part of a network partly by way of their close location.

Proximity also played a role for the elderly in the Northwestern Village. In abandoned neighborhoods with only pockets of elderly living close to each other (if at all), a next-door neighbor could mean an opportunity to share conversation through a fence or backyard coffee-time such as with Auntie and her neighbors. During that meeting, Auntie noted how the properties were open between them as neighbors. "Yes, see, how we go to visit each other" she said, "there's no point to have a fence because she's not going to steal from me and I'm not going to steal from her." And finally, a few neighbors still got together close to the village center to set up a table and have an evening gathering to chat and talk about events.

When examining the emotional support and comfort provided from neighborhood networks, zones and spaces should be highlighted alongside the interpersonal relationships that take place within them.[138] However, the importance of proximity within neighborhood networks and relationships among the elderly do not necessarily have to be about space, they can also be about shared experiences. As previously mentioned, many neighbors I met had relationships stemming from past trajectories such as being friends in school or having worked together. Often, I heard women in the Southern Town say that they worked together in the kitchens and canteens for the miners. They would thus share concerns, work habits, travel experiences, gossip, and more. These shared moments offered connections that linked past friendships to present ones, which were now mainly outside of work (although still between the same individuals across time).

Finally, proximity offered ways to explore degrees of closeness over time in the sense that it could refer back to family relationships between neighbors. During coffee time at Auntie's house

[138] For example, Gardner looked at the relationship of neighborhoods alongside "third places" and "transitory zones" for elderly "aging in place" (2011:263-264).

in the Northwestern Village, her neighbor's visiting daughter mentioned that she thought people got along well (in general but not always) and were closer because many of the houses and families were related. These proximal neighbors were more likely to help each other, otherwise they were not that close or friendly all the time.[139] A visiting grandson in the Northwestern Village also echoed this notion, but said that proximity came with paradoxes – people could be envious yet remain connected.

> **Visiting Grandson (from the north):** [After explaining that the people in the village are hard-workers] … you know about the envy in North-Western Bulgaria, it's just like this…
> **Translator:** Yes, yes…
> **Visiting Grandson:** Here nobody looks in his plate and always looks in his neighbor's plate, and one doesn't live for the sake of…well in one's family they may have fights and they may beat each other but he doesn't care what happens in his house, he watches/cares about what is the situation like at his neighbor's.
> **Translator:** Yes.
> **Visiting Grandson**: This is very bad, but this is maybe because the town is…and even the villages are not that big and the town is not that big and…but let me tell you I think this is the reason why most of the people are close somehow, and they know each other.

Necessity

Neighborhood networks also offer health and social support in times of necessity. In a study of rural communities in Northern Wales, Wenger defined support networks as "all those closely involved with the elderly respondent providing companionship, advice, help or care…the *support* network was not the whole *social* network but formed the core of it" (1991:149). Most support, she found, came from elderly's immediate families, while friends and neighbors were important for "companionship" or help related to needs that "depended on proximity," especially

[139] Under previous communist governments or socialist states, scholars note that relationships with neighbors relied on weaker ties for primarily instrumental needs (such as small jobs or companionship) and with families being the core of informal support (Pojani and Buka 2015; Völker and Flap 1997). One reason for this was because these regimes also heavily surveilled citizens as a mechanism of control, with authorities often turning to neighbors as informants (Verdery 1996:24-26 on surveillance; Völker and Flap 1997:248-249; Pojani and Buka 2015:67-68). People knew about this practice and thus distrusted neighbors, turned to stronger ties for core support, and limited reliance on neighbors to when instrumentally needed (Völker and Flap 1997:248-249, 256; see Pojani and Buka 2015:67-68).

for elderly living alone or without families (150).[140] Wenger also considers variations in social support, particularly with a focus on applying strategies to help the elderly. She notes one scheme by which neighbors might be paid to care for others in locally integrated or self-contained networks (Wenger 1991:157) – something which I began to see taking place in the Northwestern Village. In that situation, a neighbor was taking care of a blind woman who I never saw leave her house. I was told that a family member had arranged for an elder villager to help the blind "baba" with things such as buying food. I also saw the store keeper deliver bread to her house. While the blind grandmother's family was away, resorting to shifting "neighbor" relationships for help (even if through payment) meant that at least the grandmother was not alone.

Moreover, needing to help each other would seem like an intuitive part of neighborly interactions in a depopulation village, except for a very important factor…the depopulation itself rendered many neighbors absent. In this situation, people in the Northwestern Village often indicated that neighborhood networks weren't particularly strong:

> **Grandfather (from the northwest):**…she's asking are they getting along? Well…
> **Shepherdess (from the northwest):** Well how…some are getting along well, some not…if I leave this chair there, no one is going to move it, if I don't do it, it'll stay there…

There was also further talk that relationships had turned "envious"[141] or "bad":

> **Shepherdess (from the northwest):** A change babo,[142] there is no one nowadays, before when we were [someone interrupts] many people, and now there is no [no one] we are 50 people.

[140] Wenger's data allowed for a typology of social support – from "family dependent," "locally integrated," "local self-contained," "wider community focused," and "private restricted" (1991:152). I frequently witnessed mergers and adaptations of the first three of these typologies among the elders I met in Bulgaria.

[141] Reasons given for this envy included changes from "democracy," but Grandfather noted that there was no work and that this led to time for gossip. In fact, my translator and I learned that the people in the Northwestern Village were even talking about our presence. Shepherdess noted, however, that they weren't saying anything bad.

[142] When some elderly spoke with my translator and me, they used the term "babo" to reference and address either of us. It is a term that also translates to "grandmother," but (as my translator explained to me at the time) they were not calling us grandmothers. In conversation between different generations, a friend noted that "babo" could be interpreted as an elder's affectionate term for a youth.

Translator: ….it was full of people and now [Translator continues translating in the background but unintelligibly]
Shepherdess: [T]here were people, and now we are 50 people only and these of us left will eat each other, that much we are hateful.
Translator: …there's 50 people left here and she said they are not really friendly to each other.
Shepherdess: Leave it, leave it [Translator – this is kind of a filler word, used to express doubts or it pretty much says "the situation is so bad that I don't even want to explain about it"].
Lisa: Ah no, no?!
Shepherdess: Yes, bad, we've become bad.
Translator: They, they've become bad.
Grandfather (from the northwest): Well envious and that's it [interrupted by others talking] ...
Shepherdess: Not to be you, but me [Translator – it's a phrase she uses to illustrate the envy between the people she talks about].

Scholars have highlighted that one of socialism's major goals was a cohesive society where collective interest trumped individualism and positioned people within a group consciousness and identity, classless societies, and built environments where neighbors were both placed under and controlled by a central state (Pojani and Buka 2015; Völker and Flap 1997; see Verdery 1996 on "socialist paternalism"). Responses like the Shepherdess's "Not to be you, but me" can be interpreted as a remark about the collective consciousness's breakdown.

My interpretation of these type of responses was that they involved a value missing in or something gone from relationships, but not that the relationships didn't exist at all (either for good or bad). As witnessed with neighbors sharing weekend coffee times together in the Northwestern Village, companionship could and did exist for some people. The time they spent together meant that they valued and appreciated neighborly moments. In fact, many people wanted to rekindle life's more social aspects such as bringing neighbors together for Sunday dancing and music, something which had occurred in the Northwestern Village's heyday and now seemed like a much-missed necessity.

Further, I saw that neighborly interactions offering help did sometimes occur. For example, a concerned neighbor came into the mayor's office one day while I was visiting. She interrupted us to report a tampering at a house. In a village of abandoned houses, a tampered lock or open gate could indicate theft. Being watchful for such occurrences helped protect the neighborhood.[143]

I also saw neighbors watch for each other by sharing seeds or talk about how they might share food. One woman, Grandmother on a Bench (GB), explained to me that she and her neighbor shared chickens. When asked if people helped each other in the Northwestern Village, she first answered with a "no" but then said, "[W]ell they help but… if there is an emergency." She also noted, however that there was some engaged exchange between her and the woman with whom she shared chickens. "I sit here all day long and I don't see any person, there's no people," she noted, "there's no…this granny comes out from there, she comes here and we sit together and blablablabla [l*aughs*]."

An Ethos of Hospitality, Sociability, and Help

Another way that neighborhood networks may come into being among elderly (and others) relies on expectations linked to a series of ethos, or worldviews.[144] I frequently encountered three of these value systems in Bulgaria – worldviews favoring interpersonal relationships based on hospitality, sociability, and help. Both hospitality and sociability concerned beliefs in being welcoming and welcomed through interpersonal contact.

[143] I experienced a similar situation while on vacation at the Bulgarian seaside. Renting a small house in a village caused some alarm to neighbors who had remarked and checked on my presence. It also proved that there was a neighborhood watch.

[144] During her research with migration retirement, Oliver (2008:113-114) also found an ethos of help and based on network relations among British retirees in Spain.

For example, when asked what others should know about his life in Bulgaria, the 70-year-old grandfather in the Small Village near to the Southern Town[145] told me that people in his region were the "most hospitable." To exemplify what hospitality meant, the grandfather from the Small Village near to the Southern Town continued to explain that there had been a Frenchman who had bought a house and who had neighbored in the village. Villagers embraced him and made sure that he had what he needed to be comfortable and well-fed throughout the season. Further, the grandfather noted that the man "was never left neither hungry nor thirsty. Eggs, milk, whatever he wanted – he had."[146] The village mayor, who had participated in the conversation, also noted that, "We accepted him as one of us." Nevertheless, the grandfather mentioned that the man had left. "And when he left, many people were sad," the mayor added. "All the same, we treated him as one of us and we'll never see him again. We loved him."

A final ethos that codified neighborhood networks and interactions was a belief in the value and utility of offering help. Time and again in areas near to the Southern Town, people claimed that their survival was based on an ideal type of help that was cultural, national, and even universal.[147] When talking about help, for example, the elderly there often used the plural pronoun "we" as in "we help" or "we help each other." Neighbors helped as in the case of watching over

[145] Stories from this grandfather and other villages from this village, a Bulgarian Muslim village located near to the Southern Town, appear throughout this dissertation. They show up particularly in Chapter 6 and Chapter 9.

[146] Being sociable and hospitable to neighbors equated to caring for one's needs and wants. In responding to Wirth's 1930's work on weakening social ties in urban areas, Campbell and Lee focused on neighborhood networks to test both perceptions and actual outcomes of "social integration, need, and available time" for the elderly (Campbell and Lee 1992:1077). They further focused on elements such as gender, age, and socio-economic status to determine some of the effects of neighborhood support, and concluded that there are variations in networks that are best "interpretable via a social integration perspective, coupled with need in the case of socioeconomic status" (Campbell and Lee 1992:1093). Never being left to either go hungry or thirsty, and never being left without a bed illustrates value systems based on social integration.

[147] This was different from narratives coming from the Northwestern Village. As exemplified by the story at the beginning of this dissertation, some people felt that social relationships had drastically changed and described relationships and their help as at risk. While family networks were strongly valued and obligations to family existed, family members were stretched and far away. Furthermore, few neighbor and community networks willingly came to help as tradition dictated at times of death. Stories like these stressed change to "people" who would have been part of a community or underlined a concept of individuals within the collective "we" having turned "bad."

the infirmed, watching over each other's property, or turning dirt in a garden. I was also told that they helped when times were difficult. In one very small hamlet, for example, with an aged population of individuals averaging in their 70s and 80s, inhabitants I spoke with underscored the fact that everything around them was old.[148] "Everything is old, everything is falling, is getting old, all old people" one person noted. As such, everyone knew each other and it was mentioned that there were but two streets, up and down "we are one neighborhood." In that one neighborhood, and with free time because of age, people mentioned that neighbors came to visit, to talk, and to help. Finally, considering what my guide (and friend) in the south said, people in the area especially came together as a way of offering continued links to "humanity," such as in times of death or in memorializing the deceased.

It would be suspect to claim that all help was something of a "pure gift" and exchange theorists would wag their fingers at such claims, chalking them up to researcher's naiveté.[149] I was once told, for example, of a Bulgarian saying that pointed to a darker ethos regarding neighbors and networks – it's not important how bad off you are, but that your neighbor is worse off. Some villagers in the Northwestern Village echoed these sentiments. As a Grandmother under the Plum Tree said during a chat one day at a far neighbor's house and with the neighbor's frequently visiting family member (VM), people no longer communicated or socialized as they once had:

> **Grandmother under the Plum Tree (GP in the northwest):** [*Laughs* and says something unintelligible] …we don't communicate like this to share with everyone, to talk to them…it's about me to have, but not you to have…that's how we are.
> **Translator:** They don't really talk to each other that much and it's again this…

[148] Per one source, this hamlet had 60 inhabitants in 2015 (retrieved from citypopulation.de). The village is also known as a Bulgarian Muslim village. Located on the Greek border, it boasts a modest Wikipedia page that tells a time when the village had over 300 families, and when borders were stretched, blocked, closed and opened again.
[149] Help demands reciprocation. Scholars might also scoff at claims people made about the regional, national, or cultural emphasis on help. In asymmetrical relationships, such as in patronages, where do scales of power tip?

VM (from the north): People got separated [Translator – he says separated, but translator understands this as people got cold toward each other] it's not what it used to be.
Translator: …this jealousy ….
GP: Earlier the old people use[d] to communicate, to work together, here your uncle [X] how you call him, they were other people, and now the people turn bad…
Translator: Hm-hm, before it was old people were helping each other…
GP: the people changed themselves.
Translator: Nowadays people…[interrupted]
VM: The people and the social situation have changed them.
GP: Social no, they don't have.
VM: Some have, some don't have.

While some behaviors I observed in the Northwestern Village may point contrary to narratives such as the above, it cannot be denied that some people felt as if there were no longer neighborly connections – particularly true in cases where very few neighbors were left to offer support and help.

Lessons Learned – Love thy Neighbor?

Is it really important the neighbors be worse off? Is there really an ethos of being helpful across Bulgaria – a sort of "love thy neighbor" world-view? Whatever the answer, an important question to ask is what direction might neighborhood networks, and the friends made within them, take for some Bulgarian elderly today and in the future?[150]

In Lelia's case, neighborhood networks meant sustaining interpersonal ties and relationships with "*posestrimi*." They created a topography of like-minded individuals with whom to share companionship and emotional support. While I never heard men talk about their friends as "*pobratimi*," networks were strong there too. In the case of the Pensioners' Club and coffee-times mentioned earlier, networks also involved neighbors. These relationships and almost daily

[150] Many thanks to Nina Conkova whose work with population studies at the University of Groningen, and engaging conversation, enlightened me towards turning to the value in studying potential directions neighborhood networks can take for elderly villagers in Bulgaria.

meetings between the elderly and their neighbors challenged some views of elders' marginality, offered instances of creativity and engagement, and sketched how elders are in fact tied to engagement. As one grandmother I interviewed said, her days were filled with engagement in field work but when she wasn't working she would "…have a rest, or go to help the neighbors if one of them works."

While neighborhood networks in smaller villages and hamlets in Bulgaria may be declining because of depopulation, the total disappearance of both bodies and networks hasn't yet come to full fruition. Take for example the case of the 76-year-old Grandmother on a Bench whom I met in the Northwestern Village, and who said that she and her neighbor sometimes (or most times) sat together at around 5 pm and talked. She had no children and was widowed. She was alone on her end of the street with the other grandmother who had also lost her husband. Three days a week, the bread came and the woman would get some so as to be able to have two days' worth of the staple. When asked what her favorite memory of the village was, this widow with wrinkled cheeks and wearing a paisley print scarf, answered that it was being young. On that lonely street, she and her neighbor passed the time fairly alone. Sometimes, however, they passed the time together.

CHAPTER 8

Families Visiting from Near and Far

"…I have children too, granddaughters like you in other countries, in Greece, in Spain…"
- Diado under the Plum Tree in the Northwestern Village

Most of the elderly I met in Bulgaria had family members living abroad. They did not necessarily want these members to return back to them. They explained that the Bulgarian economy had suffered such that there was not enough work to sustain an acceptable living for their adult children and grandchildren. They recognized that there were no longer opportunities for their children to socialize with their own peer groups. They also expressed a desire for their children's well-being over their own – a value that parents extended to their offspring beyond the confines of space and time.

Not wishing family back did not mean disengaging from them when absent. The elderly upheld cultural values underscoring the importance of interpersonal family relationships and extended those across distances. They were also emotionally tied to their progeny and missed them. In a depopulating and aging landscape, the conflict between not wishing family back for their own good and being emotionally tied to them created disharmonious moments of despair. The greater the distance, the greater that sadness.

One such moment occurred when meeting a grandfather who was picking yellow plums from a tree on a semi-abandoned street in the Northwestern Village.[151] Diado under the Plum Tree [DP] was an elderly widower who, upon seeing my translator and me, quickly gushed into

[151] I first wrote about Diado under the Plum Tree in an earlier paper and write-up of exploratory work entitled "Narrating and Strategizing Things and Time: Tales from a Declining Village in Northwest Bulgaria" (Le Fevre 2009 [unpublished]). Parts of that paper appear and have been adapted here and in the next chapter so as to incorporate this grandfather's story and how it was effected by visiting patterns and a stolen village bell.

narratives about his own granddaughters. We had stopped to say hello while out on a walk, and he greeted us with a smile. The smile quickly changed to tears as he bestowed wishes onto us. "[B]e live and healthy," he said as he started to cry, "…be live and healthy, I have children too, granddaughters like you in other countries, in Greece, in Spain, in oh God, God."

As the conversation with DP continued, he asked about whether I was married and if I had someone "over there." We learned that he was confusing if I were Bulgarian and/or visiting. In either case, he noted that it was "good" that I ran away from the village. We also learned that DP shed tears not only because seeing us drew to mind family far away, but also because he was distraught about the loss of the village bell.

As we shall see in Chapter 9, the bell was generations old, part of village traditions, and had been stolen in the middle of a night. This grandfather said his job was to ring that bell.[152] It also had the names of three historic village elders etched on it, including one belonging to his own family. When the bell went missing, so too did a marker of his heritage and that of others who had family roots in that place. One can say that when the bell was stolen, the Northwestern Village also lost a concrete marker of its family ties. As with the bell, the question was whether family ties (those lost from out-migration in search of work) would come back.

> **Lisa:** … well when people, when people…when people go away, grandfather, do they come back?
> **DP (from the northwest):** Difficult work ["work" has many meanings, in this context the phrase means less likely].
> **Translator:** …later
> **DP:** Nobody.
> **Translator:** Difficult, no one, no one so far.
> **DP:** Nobody, nobody comes back, forward, not backward.
> **Translator:** Hm-hm, they just go forward, and they don't go back.
> **DP:** Why would they come here, look here, a big town, no money, there's nothing, dangerous work [in this context "dangerous work" means - bad situation].

[152] Diado under the Plum Tree took ownership of duties involving the bell, although my translator and I later learned that ringing the bell was neither his job nor an official job in itself. Ringing the bell was voluntary and depended on family members when it came to tolling it for a death.

Why Visit?

Diado under the Plum Tree wasn't the only grandfather with grandchildren far away. As many Eastern European scholars note, the migration story is neither new in Bulgaria nor in the former socialist countries which experienced generations of younger rural families leaving their elders. The young moved in ideological and economic marches towards cities benefitting from industrialization and urbanization (Creed 1998; Konstantinov 1996; Halpern & Kideckel 1983; Wolfe 2000). Scholars also note that changes from government transition, economic hardships, entry into the EU, and other demographic movements continued the migration (see for example Ghodsee 2002; Krasteva 2006; Morokvasic 2004). In fact, most of the villagers in the Northwestern Village had grandchildren in cities across the country, Europe, and beyond. Despite this, they remained tied to family engagement for emotional and socio-economic aspects of well-being. As such, they tried to foster expectations that highlighted intergenerational support and reciprocity.

When talking about grandchildren abroad, for example, the elderly I met in both regions would take out photos to show me. Sometimes these photos were in neat pocket albums. Other times they were on display on dresser tops or on the wall. A grandmother showing me the photos might kiss them or take me to a closet of items that she might be keeping for both her adult daughter and a young granddaughter. These closets, or "*garde-robes*," held keepsakes and presents that almost served as dowry should they eventually be needed. Thus, links to family members included filial duties, with grandmothers still caring for their female kin far away. In fact, some grandmothers provided financial assistance and those in the south might even provide child care when their families needed money for schooling or when small and teenage children needed to be

tended while their parents worked in foreign lands.[153] As Fry notes (2009), family ties – such as those listed – don't absolutely break across borders, but instead they often "stretch."

The stretching and continuation of family ties could be seen in visiting patterns that the elderly experienced. Whether their families were located nearby, very far away, or gone, the elderly I met remained attached. They were not only attached to the interpersonal relationships these visits brought, but also to the salient social, emotional, and economic support that resulted. Because of this, the elderly either wanted to or chose to be engaged. They also couldn't disengage from experiences and expectations that came with these networks as they worked within structures and for resources. In some respects, it would seem that they were tied to time-worn relationships and practices, but they were actually working alongside them to carry forth useful continuities and permutations in order to remain resilient and "alive".

This chapter explores how family visiting patterns engage the elderly and their families in both continuities and changes to interpersonal relationships that could offer social, emotional, and economic support. It explores how some elderly in Bulgaria, and their family members away at various distances, want, choose, and are tied to practices that work within not only cultural paradigms but also with stressors in their lives. It also underscores resiliency to work within adaptations responding to adversity.

Family Close-by and the Choices Involved with the "Weekend" Visit

The most common means (and culturally supported) type of family visiting pattern in Bulgaria, is that which comes from family members who live a few hours near to a "home" village and who can visit "*baba*" and "*diado*" on the weekends. These visits engage generations of family

[153] Grandparents taking care of grandchildren while those children's parents were working abroad, was something that I witnessed in the south. Grandchildren I encountered in the Northwestern Village were either visiting with their family members or spending time in the village during the summer, a practice which occurs across Bulgaria.

members in: 1) choices they make out of filial duty and bonds, and 2) in engaging with planning, executing, and ending the visit until the next cycle begins[154] (see Climo 1988 on distant family visits). Cyclical in nature, the weekend visit also tied people in ways that maximized obligations and benefits for the elderly. In the Northwestern Village, I was able to experience and engage in these visits and the continuity to ties that they extended.

Preparing for a Weekend Visit

As both "ritual of renewal"[155] and ritualized maintenance, trips to family members in isolated villages, as well as in small towns, takes family investments in preparation and time (Climo 1998:61). In a study involving distant family members among Jewish professors in the United States, Climo noted ritualized visiting that included five stage – "(1) preparation and planning; (2) travel and greetings; (3) adjustment; (4) settling in; and (5) separation and departing" (1998: 61). These stages were affected by various factors such as sociodemographic influences, health, and distance (Climo 1988:64-65). This also held true for my experiences in Bulgaria. One element that Climo's study did not include was the amount of choice and care taken by adult children in preparing, planning, and performing filial duties as work for the elderly (e.g. work around the family house or in the garden). In fact, the preparation and planning stages for the weekly visit in Bulgaria took decision and work from the moment the visit began straight through to the moment it ended.

[154] Returning to home villages from nearby cities could span from two days to more depending on the adult child's situation. For example, if one was unemployed or retired themselves, trips could last. Holidays, funerals, or harvest times might also affect these visits.

[155] Climo (1988) defines the visiting patterns in his study as perceived "rituals of renewal." He writes that "The adult children in the investigation commonly perceived visits to and from their elderly parents as rituals of renewal in which parent-child bonds are reestablished and reaffirmed" (Climo 1998:61). Since this usage also holds true for some of the adult family members who visited their aging parents in Bulgaria, I have adopted and adapted Climo's discussion of both the purpose and stages in long distance visits.

Preparing for the weekly visit to the Northwestern Village often happened the day before actual travel, and was in some cases ongoing depending on what needs or chores were pending. The day before travel included running errands to collect items that would be brought back to the village. This involved going to the pharmacy to fetch medication or toiletries, or to the mini-market and the bazaar to buy food items or soda drinks. While the Northwestern Village did have one small store located on the main street, items bought in the town were cheaper. The village store also stocked goods that people could not get from their own resources (e.g., gardens) such as chocolates, candy, aspirin, lemonade soda, and coffee. When I went along one of these errands, I noted that some fruit and vegetables were purchased, especially if they weren't in season at the time. This included produce such as cabbage and tomatoes (even if these were normally grown in family garden plots), pineapples, apples, and bananas.

The drive to the Northwestern Village also had planned stops along the way. A common and frequent stop people made was at a roadside spring to collect water. The spring led out onto the road's shoulder through a pipe coming from a field of sunflowers. There was often a line of people waiting to fill empty plastic soda bottles or plastic jugs with the mineral water stemming from this source. I was told that even merchants from the local cafés came to get the water since it was free. For aging family members in a village, the water relieved some of the hassle involved in fetching drinking water from wells or outside faucets.

Driving on the paved road to the village was also an investment that took frequent stops and time. We passed people with horses and carts, visited other family members who lived along the way, and occasionally stopped to sight-see at a small church, a field, or near caves. The latter stops were made for me, but visiting family members to chat or stop by was sometimes part of the parcel. If any items had been forgotten from the main town, there were other larger villages where

bread could be bought or a last stop to a pharmacy made. Once off the main street, however, villages were hidden and nestled high in hills.

This was the case for the Northwestern Village. Its main road cut off the paved street and was a point of contention for many elderly I spoke with and for their family members. It was a dirt backroad, filled with pot holes and bumpy, resulting in stops to check the car's engine. People would joke that the road was not meant for Western cars, but instead for former socialist ones. They said it was so bad that it often impeded visits by more family members. Even the doctor who visited the villagers on what was supposed to be a weekly schedule, cited the road as one of his major difficulties coming to the place. In fact, the whole infrastructure posed difficulty.

After a bumpy 20-minute stretch of climbing high into the hills and altitude, a house suddenly appeared and then empty yards and gates. We, the visitors, had arrived in the Northwestern Village. A couple in their late 70s and early 80s were waiting for us. Upon noticing our arrival at the house gate, they rushed out from the yard to the parked car. Though it was my first visit, the grandmother (Baba) came quickly to my side of the car and reached for my shoulders. With medium cropped white hair and turquoise blue eyes shining, her face was beaming in a large smile as she kissed me.

Visiting to Keep Bonds

Adult children who go back to villages on a weekend basis (or longer) often do so out of care for family members and because they want to keep the family bond (see also Climo 1988 on "renewal"). This creates an emotional support structure and moments of happiness for elders who voice feeling isolated or alone when family is away. In return, the elderly look forward to and want to engage in these visits. As Climo (1988) notes, family trips to elders at distances sustain bonds through a sense of renewal.

According to one visiting family member, the reason for going back to the Northwestern Village was because his parents were there. In his explanation, a mother, father, and child (in this case adult) made for a happy and traditional unit. Visiting his parents also renewed his bonds with the place, but this was a choice he made for as long as they were still there. During a conversation one day with Grandmother under a Plum Tree (GP), a visitor who had stopped over at his parents' house (her far neighbors), he noted that the youth also have a bond – in this case to their "homeland."

The conversation at that time had revolved around whether the youth (i.e. grandchildren) would return. The grandmother answered, "They'll come back…they'll come back last year." The visiting family member tried to explain that if there were other young people around, then the youth might come back. However, it was difficult for them to stay without other peers with whom to communicate.

> **Visiting Family Member (VM from the north):** If there are young people here, young people will come because…together...
> **Translator:** Yes.
> **VM:** If there are old people, young somehow it is not working [*laughs*].
> **GP (from the northwest):** Well yes…but we are getting older babo…
> **VM:** Look now…all of them care about the homeland.
> **GP:** All of them, yes.
> **VM:** Everyone's heart drags one here but you need to have conditions, to have company, to have…well community here young ones.
> **GP:** Yes.
> **VM:** The old ones to be with the old ones, the young ones with the young ones.
> …
> **GP:** Yes.
> **VM:** They'll go out on a dancing-party, working-bee, for a coffee…to chit-chat…something…
> **Translator:** Yes, yes.
> **VM:** …but if there's no one to do this with… well how to…
> **Translator:** Everyone wants to come back of course, you know even the young ones, but… if they know other young people here then….
> **GP:** We don't want us to be good any more, them to be good, the young ones, but when there's no chance/possibility.

Both GP and this visiting family member were in the village because of aging parents. Grandmother under the Plum Tree lived in the village and took care of her "baba" who she explained was her elderly mother. She did this out of filial duty and necessity:

> My granny [is] my mother…She is lame and she had [a leg operation twice] and now I have to take care of her, my dad is [dead]…from [the] 90th year and I stayed to take care of her…I don't see with this eye at all, from 3,4 years, my mouth went crooked I got it, was it from nerves, was it from high blood pressure, I am not OK with the health too…and around her to watch over, what to do she is my mother.

The visiting family member, on the other hand, lived in the town and came back weekly because he wanted to help and keep the family bond. A difficult situation with the Northwestern Village was that it consisted of just pensioners. When his parents were gone, he wondered what would keep him bonded to the village.

When pressed to explain, he noted that there were economic hardships tied to maintaining the village home. There were also no jobs for him in the Northwestern Village. As for others who were away or lived abroad, he noted that they visited for vacations. After parents died, they made decisions about whether to come back depending on their weighing of incentives and investments. For himself, he felt good going back with his parents there, but once his parents would be gone, he said he wouldn't feel well and wouldn't have any interest. That is to say, there would be a change in his emotional investment to the place.

The Weekend Visit's Salient Social, Emotional, and "Economic" Support

Visiting family members provided powerful emotional and interpersonal investments for the elderly in the Northwestern Village. They also included social and economic investments. The "economic" investments were not about making profit, but about being profitable with resourcefulness and work ethic. Frequently visiting family members, for example, provided the elderly in the Northwestern Village with access to soda and goods from towns or cities, as well as

provided manpower to work on houses, in gardens, and in family fields. Just as the adult daughter in Chapter 7 who returned weekly to be with her mother and who helped with making jam the day we met, other family members provided services in preparing winter goods and meals.

I shared in responsibilities, for example, for canning tomatoes, digging potatoes, and harvesting wheat. Summer harvest time was particularly important for drawing relatives in for help with the work. At that time, I could more readily see which houses in the Northwestern Village had living family nearby as plastic tarps lined the road in front of homes. These tarps would hold wheat or cereal kernels reaped from fields and sifted through as adult daughters and sons helped pack them for winter storage. In talking about this work, I learned that it was a valued family ethos and one that involved practicality and seriousness. It was further explained through pantomime that having family members who slept through work, or who frowned at it (meaning somehow skirted it) resulted in discontent and did not make for good families.

Visiting was not all about work in the Northwestern Village. It was also about moments of respite and sociability. For myself and for others in the village, it was emotionally uplifting to see a home with a visitor's car parked outside. Other uplifting signs of visitors included younger and more diversified clothes hanging outside to dry, or the sounds of a soccer ball being kicked around on the street. Restful moments also occurred during mealtime or when watching TV in later afternoons and evenings. These times could be used to talk about the day, and to discuss future activities and family affairs. Jokes would be told at the table, and food would be shared as well as commented on.

Gathering to watch TV there often happened after both lunch and dinner. In the afternoon, the television time was devoted to soap operas, whereas in the evening families would watch the news or whatever movie might be playing. Newspapers were also read, particularly those geared

toward pensioners. Contents in the latter included medicine ads; photos, ads, and notices dealing with folklore; articles (e.g. on medical conditions); death notices; recipes; and a comic page. And finally, there might be time for a nice nap with family members retreating to beds either in the same room or different ones. All in the family might take a nap before the next round of work.

The Emotionality of Departing

As in Climo's (1998) work, departing time for visiting family in the Northwestern Village also took preparation, particularly the emotional sort. The elderly had to brace themselves for the loneliness and workload that many experienced during the week when alone or without visitors. Adult children who lived in nearby towns and didn't drive would wait at the one village bus stop. They would gather with their elderly family member(s) until the white mini-van approached. At the end of the weekend stay, they frequently left with food and materials their aging parents provided for them, which was often whatever seasonal produce was available from the garden. Perhaps they left with jars of preserved fruit. While families would cheerily wave goodbye to each other, there was a solemn feeling when the van left and I watched the remaining members walk back to their homes. The feeling could be summed up as sadness.[156]

This sadness recalls the end of my own visit in the Northwestern Village. Late in August 2008, my translator and I ran into an elderly grandmother we frequently saw. The 86-year-old wore rings, bracelets, and gold earrings and had been sitting near the bus stop. My translator and I were heading to visit another village and struck up a conversation with this "baba" as we waited.

Talking to us about her day she noted that she had no work at that moment and would probably do nothing but sit or maybe dig potatoes. Musing on the nothingness around, she noted

[156] In his study, Climo (1988:64) also noted that separation at the end of a visit caused people sadness. "The sadness and uneasiness of saying good-by," he wrote, "is often ameliorated by conversations and plans for future reunions" (Climo 1988:64).

having family in another village that had 2 stores and more people. There was even a discotheque, she said, and although it didn't play music men and women gathered there. The last point returned her to reverie about times when she had been young and beautiful, and then she added that at least she had been young. For 14 years, she and her family had been involved with mining away from the village. A widow now, and her family away, she asked my translator and I, "Who will make us happy?" when we would be gone and our visit over.

When I left the village, there was a moment of sadness but there was also a sense of resilience. I remember an emotional send-off when Grandfather (from the northwest) shed a few tears. He told me that if there had been emotional moments during my stay that I should forgive them in the village since they were old. He and his wife, however, saved the tears when it came time to drive away. Instead, my memories of them were captured in a photograph. They stood side-by-side on the dirt road in front of their house, waving a great big goodbye.

Family Visiting the Southern Town

Breaking down in tears after visiting family have left (even frequent visitors) also happened in the Southern Town where the population was greater and the stressors to dwindling interpersonal relationships less immediate. One day in February 2013, for example, I called a friend to say hello and received a hearty dose of humor. "Oh, you can't just call to say hi," she noted. Instead, she remarked that I had to come over for a visit and that Lelia, with whom I often had coffee, was waiting for me. Lelia already had guests that day, but I could be a guest upon the guests! Agreeing, I mentioned that I would head right over and return some glass canning jars I had received. Again jovial, my friend remarked that the jars could wait, thus stressing the importance of the visit for company more than on the material need for things.

Nevertheless, I packed up some food I had made, four mandarins, and the jars and walked over toward Lelia's house. I saw that she was going out with her family who was visiting and

briefly met her daughter, son-in-law, and adult grandchildren in the street. They were taking Lelia out for an hour or so before they had to leave to return to a nearby city. I agreed to visit her upon her return and instead spent time with my friend who noted that Lelia didn't like to be alone, which was a general consensus for the family.

When I finally made it to Lelia's first-floor room, another visitor was there. Lelia was sitting at a table offering coffee to one of her neighborhood friends. I had brought a cup of tea over, so I declined Lelia's offer to make me something to drink. Instead, we chatted for a while and I sensed that the mood was different. It was glum. Lelia's friend explained that it was difficult to have guests who would then leave. When that happens, hosts are left alone again. By this, she meant that Lelia's family had gone. Chit-chatting or eating mandarin oranges, which Lelia peeled for her friend, didn't help the mood that day. After a short moment, the friend said she too wasn't feeling well and left, thanking Lelia for the coffee and me for the mandarins.

After the friend left, I could see that Lelia was distressed. She broke down and cried that she was alone. She was missing her family. I hugged her and said that I understood, to which she replied that I understood because I was alone too – without my mother. She would often joke that I could say that she was like a second mother.

It was clear that having family there and then having them leave had taken an emotional toll on Lelia. While her family was only about an hour's drive away and frequently visited (often monthly), the aftermath of a visit left her sad and feeling lonely. Lelia chose to live alone, to stay in her house and in the Southern Town, and loved days of visits and socializing. Despite the strong friendship and neighborhood network that she had cultivated, the emptiness after her kin left was overwhelming. This was the overwhelming emotion I had first seen in the Northwestern Village

when the grandfather I had known had broken down in tears. It was also an emotion that was understood by others who could sympathize with the feeling, such as Lelia's friend.

Offering sympathy was one way that I attempted to empathize with Lelia, and other elders who felt momentary emotions of loneliness or sadness. Telling her not to cry, I invited her to my apartment for coffee the next time. She replied that she didn't know where I lived and that I would have to come and take her. I listened to stories and attempted to engage her in conversation. I asked her if she would go to visit her family, something which she did do but that she noted it was better for them to come to her.

Reflecting on her own past immediate family, and members of her sibling group that were still alive (a sister far away), Lelia told me another saying that she would frequently mention. Rather than saying that life was hard and sugar in coffee made things sweeter, this adage had a heavier dose of fatalism. Everyone's life (or destiny), she stated, is written on their foreheads but that often people did not want to read it. The destiny for women, or their lots, was to bear the good and the bad, she thought. Asking me if I saw the truth in this, she said that she understood how it (life for women) worked. There was and always has been work to do; cleaning in the house, food preparation, etc. – a lot different from the situation for men.

The strategies I offered that day, could not help the mood. Instead, Lelia gave me some of her savory cheese pastry dish (*banitza*) to take home, emptied the container I brought food in to clean it and replenish it with a warm dinner, and then accompanied me to the door so that I could take my leave. I mentioned to her that I would eat my dinner that she gave me while writing that night and think of her. I asked her not to cry. She responded that she wouldn't and then mentioned that there was trash to be taken out. As I was near it, I took up the duty. This strategy, at least was useful and something effective for the moment at hand. Like a neighbor and a friend, I could offer

Lelia instrumental support with an odd job, but I could not replace a fundamental core of relationships – family.

Family Abroad, Far Away, or Gone

Family that were abroad or who lived too far away to frequently visit the Northwestern Village or the Southern Town were not completely absent. Village and town inhabitants who spread out to Spain, Greece, or Germany, for example, do so for work and to help offer remittances back home. In this way, the generations are still providing for loved one. Houses get built up, bills get paid, and those remaining in the sending communities are financially supported and kept in the family fold. Those left behind, however, assume new roles. In the Southern Town for example, some elderly and children I met engaged in responsibilities that would normally be taken care of by adult children and parents at home. The elderly might become grandparent caretakers and children might become responsible for financial obligations and home maintenance while they also juggle school, friends, and the inherent challenges of adolescence.

The greater the family distance, the more challenges and risks there are to sustaining frequent visits between the elderly and their younger generations. The family visit may become seasonal or revolve around spurts of economic and job opportunities. As these jobs are often acquired through friendship, immigrant, and neighborhood networks via word-of-mouth or acquaintances, they might be within unstable niche markets which wax and wane with demand. The jobs also tend to be low-paying and remedial work, often with frequent turn-over. Hotel work may rise in the summer at the sea-side, playing music for an event might depend on how many wedding opportunities are around, and jobs for construction workers might depend on development efforts. When there are down moments, family might return to villages and towns in

Bulgaria for longer stays that are both for family and to conserve resources. Otherwise, they may stay away for longer.

When work abounds abroad, visiting occurs less frequently but ties through communication may intensify weekly. Technology played a role in this. For example, some elders in the Southern Town mentioned using Skype to keep in touch with distant family members living in other countries. In fact, when I did a Skype call with one of my friends there, he suggested that the topic would be a great area for future research interest, something (with technology) which the anthropology and aging field has recently turned to investigating. While Skype has become a trend with potential for organizing and sustaining long distance ties among many Bulgarian elders, I barely witnessed the elderly using computers (especially in the Northwestern Village).

Instead, a telephone remained the apparatus and technology of choice for many elderly I met. In fact, in one outing in the Southern Town with Lelia to visit a "*posistra*" (close female friend) of hers, a phone's utility came up in conversation. Lelia and I visited her friend after going to church and were invited to stay for coffee with her and her daughter. Conversations revolved around family and other friends far away. The family also had a computer to use to talk to grandchildren abroad. What I noted, however, was a story of a friend who had married in a nearby village long ago. Lelia's friend said that while they used to see each other, they didn't anymore. "Thanks to the phone we don't see each other," she noted with a laugh. Though the comment seemed somewhat sarcastic, the phone actually benefitted them. It turned out that the friends used to see each other once a year, but now they called each other once a week!

For the elderly I met both in the Northwestern Village and areas in and around the Southern Town, the telephone bridged distances. Rather than using cell phones, which most families and elderly had, a land line was most often chosen for the long-distance family call. Times and days

for calls would be tentatively set for the elderly so that they could be nearby and ready to answer the phone. Families also had systems to alert each other that they were going to call the land line for a chat, such as a quick call on or a series of cell phone rings. Elderly family members would then gather by the home phone to happily talk to their relatives, explain the goings on in their village or town, and send love until the next scheduled phone time. Such calls offered weekly or sometimes even daily "visits" to the elderly. They also offered established routines of sustaining family care and renewing filial duties, especially for relationships stretched across countries and continents.

Strategies for Well-Being when Families are Gone

What happens if all family are gone or if family members are unable to visit their aging grand and great-grandparents? More and more in the Northwestern Village, there were harbingers of the loneliness and sadness that happen when a village is isolated and aging. The statement that nobody was left to dig graves, for example, brought me to the field in the first place to see what life might be like in the absence of interpersonal help and support. There were also harbingers that without links to family ties, there was threat of demise.

The same Grandfather from the Northwestern Village who called to say that there was nobody left to dig graves anymore, summed up the situation. We had been sitting together with a neighbor he had grown up with all his life. An aging shepherdess (Shepherdess) she had come to sing, share stories, and participate in an interview. While it was a jovial time, the jokes were dispersed with reality. In one tale, for example, Grandfather explained that a local grandmother had died in her house and that when she was found,[157] domestic animals had already gotten to her

[157] In their article on post-socialist neighborhood relations in Tirana, Pojani and Buka (2015:73) document a similar quote and categorize it under some people's "disillusionment" and bitterness about their present situations and times. "Nowadays, if you die in your flat," they quote from an individual, "neighbors won't even find out" (Pojani and Buka 2015:73).

body. I asked who had found her, and he explained that her family did. What would happen to those without family in such a situation?

> **Lisa:** And didn't this woman have any family? …to/who check[ed] on her?
> …
> **Shepherdess (from the northwest):** Who?
> **Translator:** The woman he is talking about.
> **Grandfather (from the northwest):** Well…relatives, see we are here with no relatives, [X] doesn't have relatives any more, she has no one.
> **Shepherdess:** I have no relatives, I don't have anyone.
> **Grandfather:** The young ones moved, the old ones are dead, there's no one… I had a sister here in [the next village]…they died, the children scattered throughout the country and … there's no one.

The two mused on the subject and noted that not only was there no one left in the village, but there wouldn't be anybody else later. Given the demographic situation, neither of the two thought any more life was coming:

> **Shepherdess (from the northwest):** …people used to give birth, there is not any nowadays.
> **Grandfather (from the northwest):** [*Laughs*]
> **Shepherdess:** [N]owadays they die ... and here in the village no children are born.
> **Grandfather:** These grannies don't want to give birth.

Joking aside, having long-standing strategies in place for sustaining the elderly's well-being (based on the cultural value and importance given to interpersonal relations) corroborates Simić's (1977) earlier arguments that disengagement may not be natural and universal for the elderly (see Chapter 2). While not an exhaustive list, the following strategies for maintaining connections (despite limited visiting) reflect how the elderly are continuously planning, coping, and adapting to stressors particular to their specific places and ethnographic times. This chapter's last section returns to the stretching of family ties through adaptations using technology and shifts in network reliance for the elderly's assistance. Because these strategies are in the early stages of the elderly's experiences and practices, I offer snapshots of innovation that can be further investigated in the future.

A Computer Class for Pensioners in the Southern Town: The role of technology for elders

One June morning, I walked over to the local library in the center of the Southern Town to join a group of pensioners taking a computer class. The one-room library was open and welcoming with large windows looking out to the center square and plenty of natural light. Children's decorations were on the wall, with book stacks at one end of the room. At 10:00 in the morning, the elders were stationed around 10 computers as they learned how to make and edit tables in Microsoft Word.

I had been invited to the class after interviewing a town member working with projects and funding offering benefits to citizens there. Funds for the computer class, I was told, came from a prestigious foundation. Those attending were mostly elderly women with just one gentleman in the group. Taking a seat near the back of the room, I asked a woman sitting next to me what they were doing, and although she answered that she didn't know about the computer program at hand, she replied that she was learning. As the lesson continued, I noticed that the people were learning not only to create tables, but also to populate cells with their names, ID card numbers, dates of birth and other personal information. In fact, they were learning how to keep track of information that could be helpful to them when filling out forms and other administrative matters.

My guide for the morning interrupted the class for a short break and to introduce me. He essentially set up a mini-focus group and noted that I had five minutes to ask questions. With little time, I asked those in attendance to describe their status and a bit about why they were there. I learned that one woman still worked, but the rest of the group were retired pensioners. The woman next to me joked that they were also housewives (save the one gentleman at his computer).

While they were focusing on constructing tables, the majority of the group expressed interest in using the Internet for more social activities such as watching movies and communicating with family on Skype. They confirmed their feeling that learning Skype would indeed provide a

useful tool to maintain family contact with their children abroad; however, I had never seen the elderly I knew use the technology.[158] I further learned from the group that only the one gentleman present was familiar with using the Internet. And, with a little less than a minute left to my Q&A, I opened the forum to any questions the group might have for me. They asked if other programs like theirs existed in other Bulgarian towns.

An Afternoon at a Café with Neighborly Ladies: Strategizing care when family is away

There was a bakery and café in the Southern Town where a group of ladies and friends met almost daily. Two of the women worked near each other as "neighbors." One was a former teacher who now worked in the café/cake-shop, and the other worked in her daughter's store providing Greek goods from across the border. The third was from a nearby village. I had become friends with the group and would venture to see them as often as I could to sit, sip coffee, and chat. One very rainy afternoon, I joined them as they sat inside the warm café and jokingly asked me where I had been heading. Answering that I had come out just to see them, they laughed and we began a conversation that once again morphed into a mini-focus group on elders strategizing.

The eldest of the group was retired (but helping at her daughter's store). She had one offspring still in the area and another abroad. Normally reserved and soft-spoken, she spoke that day on family concerns involving elderly and their care. My own mother's stroke had spurred the conversation, and the topic of old age homes for the elderly became a strategy talked about contentiously.

Homes for the elderly are not a normative strategy for aging in Bulgaria, and I learned that there were a few nearby as we talked. The woman spoke of an individual who had a stroke and who had been taken to a home for care. The group mentioned that he had several children, implying

[158] Many elders' adult children who were in their 50s and 60s did use Skype. These adult children were often grandmothers or grandfathers themselves.

that under usual circumstances, the children would normally provide the support. This comment also illustrated the pervasive understanding that people help their own kin. However, the story ended with a side note that the elderly gentleman's children did not live near, so placing him in a home had become a viable option even if not normative. Just as Skype was a strategy to respond to globalizing forces that stretch kin far and away, the old age home was seen by some as an alternative in response to the stretching and thinning of family.

Shifting Reliance: Neighbors

Both frequent and infrequent family visits have consequences for the elderly in the areas I visited, particularly for those of advanced age. The same day that I visited the former egg storage turned pensioners' club in the Northwestern Village, Grandfather's wife (Baba) fell on the concrete walkway outside the home that led to the family's front garden and summer kitchen. For the elderly in the village, garden passages posed all kinds of dangers as many were uneven, narrow, paved with stones, or had cracks and crevices.

Then in her 80s, Baba had fallen with all her weight on her cane and arm. She lay to her side, helpless. I was nearby and tried to lift her when I discovered what had happened, but couldn't so called for help. The family men responded immediately and got her off the ground. The result was a lot of pain in Baba's legs, and a large bruise covering her entire left hand. Luckily for Baba, her two family members were there to help, console, and care for her after the incident.

Baba and her husband (Grandfather from the northwest) were two of the villagers to still have immediate family nearby, and the frequent weekend or four day visits offered assistance for their care. In fact, her son was her primary assistant, and able to come running if she fell. If the fall was not too serious, he could lift her and offer help. He could also offer additional safeguards after the incident using foresight to make preparations around the house.

Additional problems might have occurred if the fall had been serious since no immediate medical facility was in or near the village. If Baba's son's car was working, then he would have offered to take her to a nearby hospital. If the car wasn't working (a frequent occurrence), then the family would have to rely on an ambulance to travel the dirt roads. This would take additional time, but at least Baba could hope for immediate attention from those nearby should she need it.

For those living alone or with kin abroad in the Northwestern Village, falling could result in dire circumstances. If the fall occurred at home, it may take some time for others to realize the person was injured. Unless I went house to house each day, and knew everyone's routine, I wouldn't have been able to know what was going on inside an isolated home.

Strategies to relieve these risks and problems are being developed on both ground and national levels. Baba's son and other visiting relatives who came frequently offered the elderly the ground-level care. There was also a program that the government had been offering for elderly assistance. The program was particularly applicable to those of Baba's son's generation who were in their 50s or 60s and who might have opportunities to provide for aging individuals' well-being. It offered to pay for four hours a day, five days a week for participants to provide elderly care, and offered the required class that could even lead to a certificate. While caring for the elderly often required more than a four-hour commitment each day, the program provided a monetary and educational incentive. Baba's son also noted that there were home care assistance (the term is mine) opportunities that offered elder care all day and included services such as shopping or cooking.

As mentioned in the previous chapter in the case of a blind grandmother, families could find resourceful ways to engage neighbors or others who lived in the community to help care for the elderly when immediate members were too far away to visit. Such arrangements were not

without problems, however, and could be unstable depending on issues or rifts that might occur. Would a program providing part-time payment for elderly care and training be renewed for individuals for more than one year? What would happen when neighbors or community members might have a quarrel with the families they help? Would efforts to find other resources or assistance be thwarted or fractioned by cross-cutting ties? These were considerations and negotiations that took place for the elderly in place and their family members who were away until their next visit.

Departing Thoughts

" …[B]e live and healthy, forwards and that's it……It's good you came here to talk to me."
- *Diado under the Plum Tree in the Northwestern Village*

This chapter has looked at how the visiting patterns of family members near to elders, far away, or gone negotiate both continuities and permutations of interpersonal ties for salient social, emotional, and economic support. The elderly are attached to these visits and the support they bring, and want to or choose to be engaged when possible. In fact, sometimes they couldn't disengage from the experiences since they worked within understandings and structures involving past, present, and future lives.

In the Southern Town, family visits with nearby members brought moments of both happiness and sadness until the next time family could meet. When family were too far to visit, ties were maintained through obligations that extended past borders and provided for those at home. When visiting wasn't possible, the elderly there have begun to look to innovation such as Skype to stay connected and computer classes, strategies that bridge localities and people in a globalized and mobile world. And while institutionalization is frowned upon, there is an understanding that it might occur if family are not in place to provide care.

In the Northwestern Village, a dwindling and aging population has created stress. Some family members still want and choose to visit out of filial duty, their own emotional attachments,

and bonds. These are often the elderly's adult children who live in nearby towns. These "children" work hard to prepare, plan for, and carry out their trips from the moment they start until the time they return to towns. Then they do the visit again. Sometimes filial duty means staying in place as Grandmother under the Plum Tree had done to take care of her own mother. For the elderly, the weekly visit from these family members bring care, resources, and emotional respite.

Many elders note that the next generation – their grandchildren – neither want to nor can spend more than a few hours in an aging village where intergenerational contact is lacking and the infrastructure is in decline. There are also families who have now completely moved to foreign countries and return to the Northwestern Village only when they can for a vacation or a short visit. Knowing this, some small shifts in network reliance have taken place among the elderly, such as with neighbors providing care for one woman or participation in funded elderly-care assistance programs. These efforts are both creative and resilient responses to adversities.

Given its trajectory, it is highly probable that eventually nobody will come and visit the Northwestern Village. The elderly there are keenly aware of this, talk about it, and even joke about their fates as a way of coping. They also reference lists of family members that are both gone and attached to the place, as if to offer up their own fates. As one grandmother there recounted to me, her whole family was in the graveyard and there was practically nobody left.

> I have only one brother in [the next village], my daughter in law and my nephew are in Italy, my niece is in Italy, she's married in [a town] and this. My older brother died in [a village] and I don't know where is my nephew now, my brother died, my father, my mother, my grandmother, my grandfather, my father-in-law, my mother-in-law all of them are in the graveyard, I have no one… and here I don't have anyone at all, here too all of them (she meant all of them died here too, all the members of her family in this village)…my husband's sister died, her husband died, the child died […] I have no one.

The next chapter looks at whether or not the elderly I met have nobody after the whole family is in the graveyard. It turns to the continuities and stretching of family ties that the elderly uphold and are engaged to in death and beyond.

CHAPTER 9

Interpersonal Ties through Death and Beyond

"…that's what's written [someone tries to say something] their names are written there, no matter where they go, those if they want…They can only melt it… other they cannot find it, throw it away [Translator – she meant here: there is no other thing they could do with it; she also says find but she means hide - they could not hide it or throw it]… it is, their names are around the bell, and this bell was such yellow, golden like this … as it is from gold…"
-Grandmother Explaining the Bell

This chapter examines the importance of and continued stress on the need for interpersonal ties and social network support for the elderly's well-being in the areas visited as it is codified both in life and death. It explores events and meanings around rituals dealing with death – a subject that drew me to the field and opened the research, and which seems fitting to close the study as it does with life (so to speak). As the chapter will show, neither death nor symbols constructed around it end the filial ties and social responsibilities that exert influence on Bulgarian elders' everyday lives. In fact, death plays an important role in maintaining elders' engagement with and to social networks both in life and beyond.

As such, death anniversaries and two types of trees found in a cemetery are explored for how they incorporate interpersonal relationships, and for how they holistically pull together elements from other chapters (socialization; adherence to peer, neighbor, and family networks; and maintained connections). After that, a section on how a community coped with and adapted to a stolen bell, (which had been used to announce deaths in the Northwestern Village), will further address concerns that community, family studies, or gerontology have historically debated such as the fear that modernization, or other rapid change processes, could destroy or weaken social ties and values. I will note in this chapter as I have previously that even in cases of extreme "decline" (e.g. a weakening of network support, services, and quality of life for the elderly), the elderly I met in Bulgaria remained resilient.

Anniversaries Dedicated to the Deceased

One cold and rainy June day nearing the end of my stay in the Southern Town, I decided to visit Lelia at her house. She had not been expecting me and was lying in bed knitting with the covers over her. She told me to come into her first-floor room and to sit on the bed. As I did so, she covered my feet.

Lelia was alone that day, and no neighbors had come by that afternoon to see her. She had been out, however, to a neighbor's house to help cook for a "*pomen*" - a ritual that honors relatives who have passed and that families follow on death anniversary dates traditionally designated 3, 9 and 40 days after passing .[159] Lelia also mentioned that she and her family would be holding their own "*pomen"* that weekend, and invited me.

As we talked, I moved by the window to sit on another bed and to go over what Lelia had been knitting, which were baby sweaters for friends or neighbors. She had different colored yarn in a cardboard box and "*terlitzi*" (or knitted slipper socks) started. Thinking of my family, Lelia asked if I wanted "*terlitzi"* for my mother. I agreed, and indicated that her feet were about my size. Lelia then pulled out another cardboard box with yet more *"terlitzi"* for me to try on. We decided on a white pair with red triangles knitted in a mosaic pattern on the front of them. She said that these had been gift from one of her "*posistra*" in another village. The socks were now passed down to me.

[159] The "*pomen"* memorializes the day the deceased died and not his or her birth date. It is tied to Eastern Orthodox traditions celebrating the resurrection. While it traditionally occurs at established intervals of 3, 9, and 40 days after passing, and then annually after that, I was told there are variations in practice. The first three ceremonies are "obligatory," while the 6 month and annual celebrations are done out of choice. This chapter explores the "*pomen"* for the links it has between maintaining and establishing interpersonal and intergenerational responsibilities.

Also, many thanks to Professor Harrington who brought up an interesting question and point regarding death anniversaries. He wondered whether or not birthdays were celebrated within these memorials. They are not. This work does not talk about birthdays, which in Bulgaria also establish important links to a person's ties and networks. For example, the birthday person is the one who offers celebration and sweets to those in his or her life as a way to honor important life-giving relationships.

For the rest of the visit, Lelia and I sat together and chatted about old stories and events that elderly talked about, and we shared a meal together. Lelia offered me some food she had prepared, serving me more on my plate than on hers, and told me to try to come and eat with her because it wasn't good to be alone. When the phone rang from a family member looking for me and offering to spend time together, I could tell that Lelia didn't want me to leave. It was cold, grey, and raining hard outside, so Lelia left me with a parting gift. She pulled out a knitted dark, blue sweater vest which she gave me to keep me warm. She also made sure that I had the "*terlitzi*" for my mother. The understanding was that I would come back later, of course, to visit her for coffee time. I would also meet her and those close to her to celebrate their family "*pomen*."

Church Prayers and *Pomen*

Lelia took care of me like she would an extension of her family. In death, people in Bulgaria take care of their family members as they would in life through honoring their memory, providing small offerings of food to both the dead and living, and minding responsibilities to remain social, filial, and engaged. The "*pomen*," which offers a commemorative day of memorial and gathering on the anniversary of a loved one's death, involves complete social and interpersonal engagement.

Scholarly, historical, and popular knowledge have traditionally recognized death anniversaries among Christian Orthodox practices, noting that memorializing links to death 40 days and beyond occur across times, cultures, and countries within the Balkan regions. In Bulgaria, Kaneff (2002:116-118) outlines how beliefs and practices around death were traditionally part of a "life-death-resurrection cycle" where the deceased moved from one stage of existence in the mortal world to another in the after-life.

She also notes that under socialism, the state engaged in and determined life-cycle rituals, such as funerals, to "'mediate'" between individuals and the "'natural/social'" orders (Kaneff

2002:90; 2006:118-119). The state endorsed state-sponsored rituals around views of death as normal and permanent, and rational and secular rather than mystical or supernatural (Kaneff 2002:90; 2006:118-119). However, people negotiated between traditional and state-sponsored practices, reserving traditions for private home spaces and state-sponsored events for the public (Kaneff 2006:110-115; 2002:93-95).[160] Post-socialism, people renegotiated their practices, discourse, and relationships with the state, life-cycle events, and tradition (see Kaneff 2002).

I had witnessed three practices involving death during my stay in the Southern Town. The first was at the Orthodox Church where Lelia took me one Sunday and where a service was being held for a recent community member's passing. The second occurred as a death anniversary in a village near to the Southern Town. The third, involved a gathering after the "*pomen*." These experiences gave me the opportunity to witness the amount of time, commitment, resources, and expenditures that took place in maintaining both the filial and social ties involved with death.

Pomen in Church

One Sunday morning in mid-February of 2013, I met Lelia at her house to accompany her to the large Bulgarian Orthodox Church in the Southern Town. Lelia was nicely dressed with a skirt, blue dress shirt, tights, purse, and a red sweater she said she had worn to her husband's funeral. She had done her hair, wore a dressy coat, and had on a nice scarf. Lelia was dressed and ready for church and for being in public.

The church was just up the street and around the corner from where Lelia lived. A beautiful stone building, its frame was welcoming and it was bustling with activity that day. A family was holding service for a loved-one's recent death. As we walked up to the building I noticed that

[160] Traditions reserved for private spaces at home included prepping bodies with family and neighbors' help, inserting items into caskets and lighting candles, or offering meals to appease the dead's soul (Kaneff 2006:110-115). State-sponsored funeral rituals took place in public spaces like village plazas (rather than in churches), through eulogies based on politicized language, and through state authorities officiating at graves (Kaneff 2002:90-95; 2004:118).

around 30 people were there. Inside, a furnace was lit to provide some heat, and around it 8 to 10 women aged approximately 60 plus were singing. There were no pews, but there were individual stands (known as stacidia in Eastern Orthodox churches) where people could lean or rest. The church was also kept lit and warm under the candlelight's glow.

The family holding the service provided candles to everyone in the church so at to honor their recently deceased family member. A 93-year-old woman for whom I had heard the town's bell toll around 3 days prior to the event.[161] Seeing that some people had lit candles and perched them on their stands, I headed to light the one that I had been given. Lelia, however, stopped me and told me that one couldn't light it right away. She continued to explain that the candle came from the deceased's granddaughter who had returned to Bulgaria from the US with her grandchildren. She came back to help during the sad times. While people were lighting candles in different sections of the church (which would be open for 2 hours on that day), our candles would be lit after the priest's liturgy.

The priest delivered his prayers to the departed while standing in front of the three-pillared (doored) iconostasis. Near to him was a table covered in cookies, sweets, two unlit candles, two sweet cakes, what seemed to be sugar (although it could have been the *"koliva"*), and spoons. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, these offerings (normally done on the 40th day) provide sustenance and ties to the dead, to their resurrection, and to Heaven:

> Koliva (grain or rice, cooked with honey or sugar, sometimes mixed with plums, raisins and other sweets) is often offered on these days of commemoration. The grain and fruit signify that the dead will again rise from the grave by God's might, for both the grain (sown in the ground) and the fruit (which falls on the ground) decay first and then afterwards bring forth abundant, ripe and whole fruit. Sugar and honey signify that after the Resurrection of the righteous, there will come a joyful and blessed life in the Kingdom of

[161] Two days prior to the event, I had remarked that I had heard the church bell toll. Lelia had explained to me that the 93-year-old had actually passed the previous day before the bell had rung. I asked why that might have been the case. Lelia suggested that maybe they were waiting to toll the bell for when the woman's granddaughter arrived.

> Heaven, rather than one bitter and sorrowful ("The Church's Prayer for the Dead," Bulgarian Diocese.org).

At the end of the prayers, Lelia nudged me that it was time to light my candle and I followed people as they merged in semi-structured lines towards the candle alters. As a community, we lit our candles and proceeded to the table to honor another community member's passing – that of a once 93-year-old mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother.

After the Pomen

I had run late the June day Lelia's family held their *pomen*, and missed the church service. Quickly walking to the church from my apartment, I had hoped to at least to make the tail end of prayers and candle lighting. Instead, I ran into the entourage of people walking from the church to the tavern nearby, and was invited along. The day was sunny and clear, but with a slight wind so we sat at the restaurant's upper, partially-covered deck. I watched the tables fill, and noticed that Lelia sat with her immediate family (daughter, son-in-law, and grandchildren). At any one time, I counted around 30 people in place with some coming and going, and asked who was present. "*Bliski, kumshi, priyateli*" I was told – those who were "close, neighbors, friends."

The family members held in honor had been deceased for 8 years. At the tables, people sipped coffee and caught up on their lives. At my table, friends who used to work together and frequently saw each other, updated each other about grandchildren. They joked about their youth and had their drinks paid for by the immediate family members celebrating that day. This continued for about an hour until, one-by-one, the group left. I stayed on and remained with Lelia, her niece, and family members for the better part of the day. As such, I could see how the "*pomen*" extended from family obligations to the dead into a family visit for the living with its moments of emotional and salient support.

Walking home from the "*pomen,"* for example, Lelia and her daughter made frequent stops to visit shops. First, we peeked into a second-hand clothing store where Lelia saw a dress everyone thought was good for her. It was a pink and blue flowered housecoat dress with short sleeves, the type grandmothers often wear during summer months, but Lelia didn't buy it. The next stop was at a modern clothing store with higher-end items such as scarves and tank-tops. Lelia joked that there was nothing in that store for a "baba." Joking back, I asked her why not as I looked at a black striped dress made from both solid and sheer fabric. From there, we went to a lingerie store, and Lelia sat down to take a rest.

Once shopping had finished, and nobody bought anything, we continued walking the short few blocks to Lelia's house. We didn't get too far before Lelia stopped to talk to an elderly woman sitting on a bench by the corner of a house. It was the first time I had really seen her stop to socialize with someone on the street, let alone seen her go clothing shopping. Socialization for Lelia when I was around usually happened at her home, meeting a friend of hers to walk to church, or at a friend's house. The rest of us continued a few steps to the street's corner and waited for her. We decided to part ways and agreed to meet up again for lunch that same day.

I headed towards Lelia's house at around 1 pm, and as I approached I smelled grilled fish. Lelia's daughter was outside in the front entry cooking fish on a gas grill, but I would have lunch with Lelia's niece at an adjoining house after stopping a moment to sit and talk with the rest of the family. Entering Lelia's first floor-room, I noticed the table had been placed in the room's center. Lelia was busying herself around the room and joked for me to take her granddaughter back to the United States with me. I had learned from Lelia's niece that Lelia originally didn't want her granddaughter to go to the States event though she had gone to work there before. Now knowing me, Lelia was comfortable with the idea.

The family was both resting from the day's events and work around the house. They were beginning the bustle of getting ready for lunch. As Lelia's granddaughter and I chatted about what I did as an anthropologist, Lelia wanted the table set and her granddaughter agreed to wipe it. She spoke English, and her brother understood. He and their father were also in the room. A bought of afternoon hail had stopped their originally intended endeavor which was to work outside helping Lelia with whatever needed to be done. As lunch approached I headed to Lelia's relative's house, again with an understanding that I would return for coffee afterwards. My duties, I would learn, did not end after the *pomen.* As in life and death, friends and family extend forward and on.

A Bulgarian Muslim *Pomen*

Death anniversaries, however, also occur in other contexts and religions within Bulgaria. One event I was welcomed to, for example, took place within a Bulgarian Muslim village (the Small Village Near to the Southern Town), family, and customs where I was invited to spend a weekend. Traveling with a young companion who lived and went to high-school in the town, we boarded a white mini-van bus to head some 20 minutes into the mountains towards her grandmother, family, and great-grandfather whose wife's anniversary date had passed 40 days of passing.[162]

As mentioned previously, the village is nestled in the mountains and is welcoming to visitors and friends from town and abroad. I had been to it a few times and with the help of the

[162] Many sources refer to a mixing and blending of both secular and non-secular practices for Bulgarians regarding religion and death rituals, as well as between ethnic and religious groups in the country (see for example Ismail and Griffith 1999; Cole 2011; Countries and Their Cultures 2016). Bulgarian Christian Orthodox memorials were held at intervals of 3, 9, 40 days principally. After that they could be the 3rd and 6th months and yearly. My young companion to this memorial explained that Bulgarian Muslim groups in the area also practiced *pomen* but on a slightly different time schedule. My friend and primary gatekeeper in the Southern Town later explained to me that the Bulgarian Muslim *pomen* principally occurred the 12th day after death when a fried sweet called *mekitsi* (like a donut) is distributed to people "*quite randomly but abundantly*." It is then celebrated on the 40 or 41st day after death which is an obligation. However, he also discovered if for some reason the 40 and 41st day wasn't celebrated, then a *pomen* happened on the 52nd day. The celebration I attended seemed to occur around the 51st day of passing.

mayor and friends, was able to interview some of the elderly, many of whom had family members in larger towns within the country or away in Europe (see Chapters 6 and 7). The community is primarily Bulgarian Muslim, a Muslim population also referred to as Pomaks in English. Unlike the Turkish Muslims in the area, the Bulgarian Muslims and Orthodox Christians I met in the Southern Town often referred to each other as brothers and sisters, sharing similarities in some traditions and customs.

After arriving in the village, dropping off bags, and freshening up, my young friend and her grandmother headed to another family house where 5 "*snahi*" (or daughter-in-laws who had married into the family) were preparing food for the next day's anniversary activities. They had come together to cook for the entire village and whoever would come. This meant preparing 20 "*klim*" (large savory or sweet dishes made of rice or potato). There was also a calf to prepare. Those meeting included 4 out of 6 sons, the 93-year-old great-grandfather (Great-grandfather) commemorating his wife, younger children and teens, and of course the wives, or daughter-in-laws.

I learned that the work had started at 8:00 in the morning, was continuing in the outside summer kitchen and patio when I arrived in the later afternoon, and would go on until at least 10:30 at night when I took my departure for the evening. Work primarily involved food preparation at that point. We cut meat, peeled turnips that would go in stew, and ate in shifts at dinner time around a table with Great-grandfather; all sharing one pot or plate to eat from.

When the dinner shift was over, we continued upstairs inside the house to cut the meat (100 kg of calf) into small pieces while the children and teens watched TV in another room. Helping, I participated in the chores and jovial conversation. Spirits were high as they talked about family,

the price of things, where people were located, and what they were working on in their lives at the moment. It was an occasion for the family to gather and catch-up.

Retiring for the evening, my young friend and I returned to her grandmother's house. I was made comfortable in a room, while my companion used the land-line to call her parents working abroad and for an evening check-in. Her grandmother had stayed behind to finish chores. When she came home, she spent a moment talking to us, offered more food, and then headed to bed.

The next morning, activities began early because the family planned to cook the meat at 5:00 am. Grandmother had already left her house before the rest of us had woken. We returned to the other family house where Great-grandfather lived to find people gathered in the spring sun with green grass, dandelions, and tulips growing around. The sun shone on whitewashed house walls as I spoke with Great-grandfather who remembered that he'd met me earlier and that I was from the United States. We talked a bit, with his great-grandchildren's help, and I recorded musings of WWII, the funeral remembrance going on, money, life, and his wife (who he noted had two names – one a Turkish name he said, and one Bulgarian which she had chosen).[163] The great-grandchildren enjoyed hearing his stories, laughed at some of the digressions, and cheerily spoke in English translating as they could.

The head of the mosque had already arrived to start singing with the men in the house. Tradition mandated this. It also mandated that Great-grandfather say his prayers, for which I watched quietly. He knelt on the carpeted floor and underneath a window. The light beamed on him and he bowed his head and body in prayers. During this time, a woman was inside the house

[163] See Chapter 3.

busying herself in another room with chores and to take care of others who were outside socializing, waiting, talking, and having coffee.

At around noon, Great-grandfather finished his prayers (he had been primarily alone in his downstairs bedroom) and the singing stopped. Presents[164] were given to close attendees which included a glass dish/salad bowl with a chocolate. I also noticed that others started to arrive, which prompted the women to begin serving the food. They did this in shifts between 2 houses to feed all the people paying their respects.

The primary house was reserved for men and women who had gathered, leaving their shoes outside in the courtyard. A second house, which belonged to one of the daughter-in-laws but wasn't lived in anymore, was opened and I joined the younger children and teens eating together upstairs. We ate on the floor with table cloths down, sharing rice "*chorba"* (meat soup), cabbage and carrot salad, meat and turnips, the cheese "*klim*," baklava, syrup and soda to drink, and bread for all. Communally, we shared the dishes we ate out of and were mindful of sharing our time and space to be sure turns were taken. We were also careful to help and clean up dishes that were finished, and replaced them with full ones.

By 3 in the afternoon, the pace of the "*pomen*" slowed with only a small group of visitors and the family remaining. Taking a walk around the village, some of the older children gathered on the main road at a gazebo to talk and chide each other. A younger child was taken to a playground where he could play on swings.[165] When I asked the group what they do in the village and when they come back to it on the weekends (most would have to attend school and stay in the Southern Town during the week), they mentioned that they walk around and hang out.

[164] Small presents are also usually passed to invited guests at Bulgarian Christian Orthodox death anniversaries.
[165] Even though a small village of somewhat 300 plus inhabitants, there was still a working kindergarten on premise.

We did just that as we visited each youth's house on the way home. The "*pomen*" had ended, people were back to duties with families with some planting onions, garlic, and potatoes in garden plots. We stopped back at the family's house where the event had taken place to say our goodbyes and then headed to my young companion's grandmother's home to sit in the yard and watch the early evening scenes. It was nearly 7:00 pm. We observed two elderly women in split houses watering their gardens (one with a watering-can and the other with a plastic bottle). A man in a neighbor's house was sitting and playing with a dog. And sheep were returning to their homes through the village's narrow streets.

Poum Poum and Fruit Trees[166]

"*Pomens"* offered Bulgarian elders opportunities for distant and close family members and friends to come together to sustain and tie interpersonal relationships across time and divides. I didn't participate in a "*pomen"* in the Northwestern Village, but it happened there too. Whether it was because the village was depopulating, people were isolated, or for some other reason the one event that did occur when I was in the Northwestern Village was small and relegated to the family realm. As my friend and translator had explained, she thought it was a private family affair.

In the Northwestern Village, I caught a glimpse of the cultural, symbolic, and personal meanings involved with another ritual dedicated to sustaining relationships with the dead. My translator and I first happened upon a series of unusual trees when we decided to visit the Northwestern Village' cemetery. The road to the cemetery in the Northwestern Village both lead in and out of the community, with the main streets and other paths leading to it. It should be noted

[166] Parts of this section first appeared in a paper written and dealing with thick description and methodology in the field. The paper was entitled, "A Tale of Two Trees: Field Work, Narratives, and Windows of Interpretive Opportunity" (Le Fevre, 2009 [unpublished]).

that these roads ran to a point alongside the area, but not directly into the graveyard. As such, the cemetery served as a small hamlet for the dead.

The graves were overrun with tall grass and creeping vines and most were tucked away on an incline and out of reach. The first and most recent row of graves, however, was the most accessible, and clearly indicative of newer occupants. It struck a contrast with those graves that were overrun, implying that the graveyard's visitors (like the village's) were dwindling. However, there were clear signs of the living having visited the site with candles, plastic flowers, and bottles of homemade drink placed for the dead along their resting places. Some of the graves were markers for more than just the dead since the names of living partners had been etched into them in wait. Not only did life and death in this place interact in these manners, but there were also two types of trees (one living and the other dead) that seemed to play off each other.

The first trees were no longer alive but had decorated branches. Formerly saplings, they had been covered with yarn and stood standing like the remains of old Christmas trees. Some of these trees lay barren on the ground, but one still stood with colorful strings of yellow, red, white, and blue wool wrapped around it. Figuring that these trees must somehow be significant, I asked my translator what they might mean. Although she was from the region, she had never seen them before in a cemetery. The only thing that she could think was that they were like sticks that children sometimes decorated around the winter holidays or with grandparents. And, since we had recently seen a memorial in the fields unusually marked with a commemorative motorcycle standing on it, we hypothesized that maybe this tree was a similar beloved artifact. Perhaps, we thought, that the person buried there loved those decorated holiday sticks and so his family decorated this tree similarly as an extension of their care and memory. This did not explain, however, why there were other old and dead trees like that one standing or thrown away nearby.

At the time, my translator and I were engaged in the beginning stages of "thick description" (Geertz 2000), as well as an opportunity to explore significant symbolic meaning that people were constructing in that place. An encounter with an unusual object – made ever more so under the gaze of my translator and friend who didn't understand what it could mean – led to intense curiosity and further investigation (see Brown 2001:3-4 on encounters, Stein, and windows; Smith 2013 on phenomenology). Much like Geertz discusses a theoretical blurring between accounts of Moroccan culture as "natural fact" with anthropological theory, one could wonder if this tree represented "conceptions of everything from violence, honor, divinity…to tribe, property, patronage, and chiefship" (Geertz 2000:15, 28 on concepts).

My translator and I took note of the trees and kept moving through the graveyard. Continuing our cemetery exploration, we marked grave histories. We looked at dates, names, and documented how graves looked. My translator, for example, would comment on things she found unusual such as when a couple in a grave did not share the same last name. She also noticed something which she found peculiar for a graveyard. Again, it was a tree.

The tree that she noticed was a large, live, and healthy apple tree with branches offering shade over two graves. Apples covered the ground and hovered over the white headstones underneath it. Next to the graves, and also shaded under the tree, was a single bench. While I thought the grave offered a nice place for someone to sit and contemplate lost loved ones, my friend wondered why in the world a fruit tree would be in a cemetery. This, she thought, was something unusual. Once again, to echo Geertz, she was asking "What the devil is going on…" (2000:27).

We found out that both trees symbolized a ritual that people did "nowadays." After encountering those two types of trees we ran into a grandmother who we knew well and who was

a shepherdess attending her flock. When she allowed us to join her on her walk, I brought up the trees. I asked through my translator "…[B]aba, when we passed the graveyard, we saw…a tree there that had different colors like yarn." The grandmother began explaining the "*Poum Poum*" tree. She said, "[I]f this takes its roots, but it usually doesn't, if it does then the dead one will have shade."

Going beyond giving shade to the dead, the tree offered continued connections with the deceased who communicated with family through dreams. Continuing about the *Poum Poum* tree, the shepherdess told us a story that she had once heard from her own grandmother. She conveyed it to us this way:

> …and there was a man whose son died and he had a dream, his son told him, my grandmother told me this, he says: "Father you know what, you will go in the woods whichever branch picks up/catches your hat, you have to cut a sapling from that tree and to plant it on my grave." The father went in the woods and the linden-tree caught his hat and he planted there this sapling of linden-tree. It took roots in the ground and blossomed and it [smelled], he says: "Eeeh father if you only know how it smells nice, it smells very nice, this thing that I told you about it took its roots in the ground and it blossomed, and it smells."

She ended the tale by saying, "This is how it was and this is how it is going to be."

Scholars such as Kaneff (2006) and Grebenarova (1998), have noted the ritualized and continued responsibilities Bulgarians have to deceased relatives. Through planting and decorating trees as well as by other means, villagers in the Northwestern Village maintain connections to family and sometimes even friends beyond the physical world's limitations.[167] Particularly significant in the above narrative concerning sustained interpersonal relationships was how the story about this ritual both began and ended. It starts with a beginning, "…that's what people do nowadays," but ends with that which has always been done. Through such an explanation, the

[167] Grebenarova's (1998) work on death rituals in Vlach communities such as the Northwestern Village, noted particular ties to the "other-world."

grandmother's story can be taken as an origin-myth that establishes specific cultural values behind practice. Through discursive device, interpretation, and meaning derived from the ritual and this grandmother's account we get a glimpse of how people's understanding of the world works and what values contribute to its and their well-being.

For Whom the Bell Tolls – Reaching out and Restoring a Lost Bell[168]

Returning to another encounter that happened under a fruit-tree in the Northwestern Village, my translator and I had met an elderly grandfather who stopped us and cried for his grandchildren living far away (see Chapter 8). He wasn't just crying for his grandchildren. He was also crying for a missing village bell that had been stolen and for which he claimed to have been charged to ring. Probing about his emotions and tears, we asked Diado under the Plum Tree (DP) how he was and what was going on around him.

> Well [drawn out] we had a bell here, a bell, now they stole the bell too, now a person dies – there's no, there's no, you don't know he's dying, a fire happens – you don't know, there's other holidays, you don't know…They stole our bell, say, no one cares about us, no one cares about us –look for a bell there, I will give you the house here in your name, bring a bell here from there.

In response to a question about his personal feelings and about events in the village, this grandfather offered the bell's narrative (as well as his house), thus thrusting it into importance. The bell became a meaningful object to everyone now involved in this meeting (Brown 2001). The brief five minutes encountering him and an object in his material world, opened a floodgate not only for feelings, but also for possible readings into a major stress affecting this elderly man in his place.

[168] Parts of the bell's story were first written about conducting exploratory work in the Northwestern Village during 2008. The work has subsequently been presented at conferences with some of this version presented at a conference on "Emotional Geographies" at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands during 2013. That presentation was titled, "What a Missing Bell Told: Narratives and Emotions in a Depopulating Village." (Le Fevre 2013 [unpublished]).

One could read, for example, one man's retelling of how a community functioned with a bell in the past and how the villagers' uses for the bell helped organize and give meaning to events in the community – the stress here would be to the well-being of everyone involved. With the absence of the bell, as well as that of children and grandchildren, DP related a type of vulnerability in his present life. Another reading further tells us how the loss of this organization leads to fear about how the community will function. A third reading concentrates on the past and the theft itself.

Compartmentalizing the situation, DP concluded that "no one cares about us." "They" who stole the bell left both him and those remaining in the village (the "us" in the story) without a way of knowing about death, disaster, or holidays – events that the bell used to announce. The theft also left the villagers without a way to ring in social and filial duties at death, and to react or interact with others in times of need or as a community.

Following Wallace's (2003) theoretical framework for paradigm shifts in thinking, acting and emotions – once communities and people are faced with stress such as a stolen bell, individuals like this grandfather and his entire community either come up with strategies to change the stress in their system or they remain in such a state (12). It is in such actions to change the situation that communities (and people) survive. Otherwise, they remain stagnant and die. It is important to note that the grandfather did offer an innovative strategy. Right after uttering that no one cared about them, he asked me to bring him a bell from "there" [outside Bulgaria], and in doing so he sought to replace the object, restore its functions, and reinvent its meaning. At the same time, he was strategizing and hoping that establishing a new network of relationships would bring him access to a valuable resource (a bell).

A Bell and Family Names Lost

The bell was stolen in the middle of a June night in 2008. The event also happened around the time that the village was preparing to celebrate its "*sabora*,"[169] or village holiday. For this holiday, which was normally rung in by the bell but could not be, those who are left with family gather together for a day of feasting, and per some accounts, dancing. The holiday occurred anyway, but without the bell.

Bemoaning the fact that the village was helpless, DP said the bell was apparently stolen without anyone hearing what had happened. With his frail and hunched body, he had climbed the wooden ladder inside the tower that led to the bell. There, he discovered that pulling the rope resulted in silence. His first reaction was to call to someone he knew in the country's capital, but then his "*kum*" (best-man or wedding sponsor), helped him understand the situation. "Come here "kume," he is my "kum," the grandfather recounted, "Come here "kume" see where is the bell, where did this rope suspend I can't ring the bell. When he looks up – well don't you see that the bell is not here, it's stolen."

With the help of his "*kum*," the grandfather saw that the bell had been stolen, but his narrative articulated more than that. While expressing despair that the bell would be broken and melted for money, he had also sadly commented about the loss's significance for his own trajectory, "my grandfather, my grandfather's name is in that bell written." Not only would his family history and its importance to the village be erased, but so too would his own. "Ten, 20 years," he said to us, "it was only me to ring the bell."[170]

[169] According to another tale by a Grandmother Explaining the Bell, the holiday being rung was a Saint Day. It's unclear whether the two accounts are of the same holiday.

[170] The grandfather's family relationship with the bell was confirmed by his sister, the mayor and another grandmother whose family name had also been listed on it. In fact, there were three kinships etched into the bell. There was some disagreement as to whether this grandfather's job was to ring the bell. As the mayor and others noted, ringing the bell was voluntary. Concerning the dead, it was the family's responsibility (and right) to choose who rang in their dead.

Other villagers also spoke about the bell's theft, though it was not the only case of theft in the village. While most of the accounts in the village revolved around this incident, the mayor mentioned that many meters of cable were stolen around the same time. That theft stopped the village from being able to use its water pumps for a week. The mayor mentioned that the cables had been stolen two or three times already. Robbers had also targeted individual villagers stealing sheep and other items. However, the loss of the bell had a much more dramatic and traumatic impact on the villagers, touching upon feelings of isolation, helplessness, and loss. For DP, his family's lost name was overwhelmingly difficult to reconcile. The same held true for others who also offered strategies for retrieving it.

For example, a Grandmother Explaining the Bell's theft (GB in the northwest) to us, also recounted a similar tale as Diado under the Plum Tree. She too had family links to the bell and the names on it, and firmly answered that she could tell us about it when we asked.

> **GB (from the northwest):** There is, there is this one the limp one who passes here (DP).
> **Translator:** Hm-hm.
> **GB:** He rings the bell because tomorrow is a Saint's Day…and he rings the bell, but he goes around this time, he goes down there to ring the bell, there's no bell, when he saw it wasn't there, no one knew, no one saw anything, there is no one there in those streets. And see how that Granny X passed away, across the waiting room [Translator - she means the bus stop, she calls it waiting room, because people wait there for the bus], the house on the corner. She was the most religious one, but when there is no bell to ring for her funeral, for the people to hear, like this the people tell each other, and there is no one to tell.
> **Translator:** Hm.
> **GB:** [A]nd that one when he went there and saw the bell was missing…and after that when this granny died there was no bell.
> **Translator:** So there across… [GB continues talking]
> **GB:** [A]nd now I don't know where do they want from some small bells, well I say a bell like for the sheep.
> **Translator:** Hm-hm, now they want to buy a small bell, and she's like … they give to the sheep on their necks.
> **Lisa:** What do the people think about that? [Translator repeats question]
> **GB:** Well who asks, who asks, no one asks them, here only old ones are left, babo, like me.

Reasons and Strategies for Retrieving a Bell

While people often said that life in the Northwestern Village was a "struggle" and they didn't give it more than five to 10 years more to survive, there were concerted strategies and efforts to retrieve a new bell. With despondent tales, tears, feelings, and stories of historical and current losses, people strove to be resourceful and resilient. As one resident (not yet retired) noted the village had planned to get back a bell by coming together and "from each house …we will buy one…because we can't…because when someone goes to the other world… we don't know about it. ...it's true it's just a few people of us have left here, but when [hear] the bell ringing it's different."

Indeed, hearing the bell meant different things for different occasions. As Grandmother Explaining the Bell noted, it was something that rung in both death and – in the past – joy:

> **GB (from the northwest):** When a man dies, and when today like around this time now, tomorrow is Sunday a holiday …[names holidays]…Christmas all these holidays, the church ones that one goes there and rings the bell. If it rings loud it is for a holiday…and when it rings "*dunnnn*" rarely [Translator – she means with bigger pauses in between the rings] it is for a dead man… and when it starts like this "*tumper-tupmer-timper*"…this is for fire, for help.
> ….
> **Lisa:** Hm-hm… was it ever used for events or festivals?
> **GB:** No, no the bell [is] not for festivals, for vecherinki [Translator – vecherinki – plural of vecherika is when mostly the young people get together in the evening, they sing and dance and tell jokes etc.] we use[d] to have before, but before there were children here.
> **Translator:** But did you use it for these?
> **GB:** No, no…only for this ….and for vecherinki here the school uuuh they come now we want I hope someone comes here too, someone to have a concert here.
> **Translator:** Hm-hm.
> **GB:** Old like this, everyone will go, but no one comes, there's no one
> **Translator:** They would like to see a concert here but…[GB interrupts]
> **GB:** and we would like to have such a fun thing, because we all are sick of grief.

One person strategizing the bell's return in the village was the mayor, who looked to her networks to restore it. The mayor mentioned that fortunately, or unfortunately depending on the

viewpoint, only one person from the village died since the bell was stolen. That story was often told with irony. The mayor (as well as others like Grandmother Explaining the Bell) said that the grandmother who died had lived directly across from the bell but was "sent away" without the bell's toll. Somehow her physical proximity near the bell gave her entitlement over it. That entitlement was robbed along with the bell. If there is a fortunate part of the story, it is that the mayor was thankful there hadn't been more deaths.

Attesting that the bell was important not only for ringing in death, but also for holidays or for community warnings, the mayor wanted to come up with a solution to buy a new one. She had hunted through networks of mayors, and searched out places and people that she knew of with bells, such as local priests. Given her budget constraints, she hoped to buy a new bell. It would no longer be in the tower but would instead be locked inside a safe location. When the bell was needed, she said it could be taken out of its locked space and then returned to safety for another day. While this new strategy would change the traditional structure surrounding the bell, it would at least preserve its function while adapting it to a new environment and time.

Finding a Bell

The village bell's theft exerted a stress on a community already experiencing extreme hardship and reminded people of loss. For some, this meant loss to traditions and filial responsibility linking the living and dead. For others, it also meant a loss of family ties that had been inscribed on the object. The strategizing around getting and protecting a new bell, however, was symbolic of some villagers' hope and desire to continue to live and age in the Northwestern Village. Locking a new and portable bell in a building, turning to established networks or creating new relations with access to resources, and gathering households together for purchasing power were strategies the villagers spoke about as ways to replace their stolen bell. Such strategic

planning turned into innovative action that could be placed within Wallace's "general processes of cultural change" (Wallace 2003:70). In this case, there were hints at resiliency as with the revitalization of community resourcefulness.

In fact, ending a brief visit to the Northwestern Village in 2010, I found out that a bell had been obtained. A grandmother and her friends who caught me the morning as I was leaving the village called me into her home's courtyard. They knew that there wasn't time to talk, but they thought it was important that I should see something she was guarding before I left. Out came a small, shiny bell the size of a water bucket. The group noted that it wasn't the same bell, but at least it existed. And while it could never restore the family names that had been on the original bell, I took solace in knowing that the grandmother showing me the new bell had restituted a sort of family responsibility. She was Diado under the Plum Tree's sister, the grandfather who expressed his despair from a stolen bell.

Part IV

CHAPTER 10

Discussions and Conclusions

Many of the elderly at the heart of this study are "hard at work" strategizing spaces in their homes or life-long communities, and relationships with geographically dispersed family members or peers in their environment, despite difficulties and stressors caused by an aging and depopulating landscape. Often labeled as marginal or vulnerable, I argue that the elderly are both "tied" and "actively" engaged in maintaining relationships with family, peers, or neighbors or adapting these for aspects of well-being like companionship or socio-economic support. The study's underlying hypothesis is that the risk of dwindling interpersonal relationships, which in the Balkans have been essential for accessing resources and support, is ultimately the main stressor affecting the elderly whom I met in a depopulating and aging landscape. While this appears to be true, the study's findings also indicate that in extreme situations, the elderly I met in Bulgaria have remained resourceful and resilient.

In remaining resourceful and resilient, the elderly adapt to or manage hardships, such as economic instability or loneliness from out-migration. They do so by tapping into relationships along valued cultural and socioeconomic pathways, or tailoring these to their circumstances. For example, they engage and cultivate core family networks for emotional and salient support – even if family are farther away than before. They also participate in peer and age group memberships based on overlapping histories for coping and to respond to social, economic, or political forces in their lives. All of these efforts underscore the continued importance in engaging and relying on relationship in the Balkans (see Simić 1977 on family relationships).

In addition, the elderly have created innovations, such as a former egg shack turned pensioners' club, and partake in spaces where they can find respite and resolve, and which allow

glimpses of continuities and permutations of social organization and practices. This includes how various groups of elders in pensioners' clubs create places to congregate both away from and in response to social, economic, and political forces affecting them. The elderly also create topographies of coffee-time, which offer some people opportunities to socialize and stay active within homes, streets, and backyards. Visits from neighbors or family sustain group dynamics and stretch across spaces, with some instances of support being shifted to either immediate family or neighborhood networks. And social ties extend beyond life to death. This extension is considered part of everlasting filial and social responsibilities to foster as long as people can.

All these efforts also further contribute to cross-cultural understandings and studies on the "aging experience," aging in place, and resiliency. Upholding the cultural and institutional importance of social networks and family from Simić's (1977) work in Eastern Europe; armed with ideas on stress, change and adaptation; mindful of the complexities involved with interpersonal models of coping and behaving, as well as the innovations elderly may create (Harrington and Boardman 1997); and situating experience and possible behaviors within a post-socialist lens, questions concerning the elderly's survival and strategies for resiliency in two areas of Bulgaria depended on mediating effective relationships with intimates, one's immediate society, and a world beyond both.

The Cultural and Socio-Economic Importance of Interpersonal Relationships in Bulgaria

The aging experience in Bulgaria emphasizes upholding the cultural and institutional importance of engaging with social networks and interpersonal relationships that has long been explored within regional conception of "Eastern Europe" or the "Balkans" – engagement through families, networks, and reciprocity. While not all people experienced relations and reciprocal ties the same way; family patterns, values or "norms" fall under categories considered Eastern

European at one time but that have progressively been seen as "threatened" or coming closer to alignment with "Western" patterns. As such, they have been examined for change such as with shifts from clan-type family structures or with marriage (see Simić 1977 on zadrugas; Hajnal 1965; Botev 1990:108).[171] Relationships have also been examined in the light of temporal and political changes in the region, as with what might have been socialism's effects on patriarchal, clan, exogenous or agriculture/peasant type relationships transitioned to nuclear or stem-families (Botev 1990; Creed 1998; Hajnal 1982; Hoffman 1964; De Vos and Sandefur 2002; Whitaker 1979). What almost all scholars have discovered, is that network reliance has been a trend in family and socio-economic strategies within the area, albeit with continuities and permutations (see for example Hajnal 1982 on agricultural communities). This is also the case with the aging experience.

Value-Driven Elder Engagement and Culture's Role:

Exploring Bulgarian elders' value-driven interpersonal relationships, taps into established debates on the role of both culture and structure in elders' engagement within their social systems (see Cumming and Henry 1961; Simić 1977). The focus has been on the place of culture (and other structural elements such as history or collective identities) in the aging experience. The impetus for that focus follows Simić's 1977 work in which he underscored that the aging experience is deeply entwined in cultural contexts and fabrics that both endure and adapt.

[171] While early scholars focusing on the Balkans such as Campbell (1964) explored dominant patterns of large patrilineal, patrilocal clan-type families in the region, others note that there was variation. De Vos and Sandefur (2002:25) and (Botev 1990) point out that Maria Todorova's (1996) work on family structure in Bulgaria challenges the idea that families were only joint-household units of a "Non-European" pattern. Instead, they highlight that Todorova's work provides evidence that there were also 'neolocal-nuclear' families (De Vos and Sandefur 2002:25). I explore the topic more in an earlier unpublished paper on gender, movement, and family, "Continuation, Change, or Complexity: An Examination of Gender, Movement and Family Structure in Albania, Bulgaria and Romania." (Le Fevre 2009 [unpublished]).

Looking at contrasting models of aging between the United States[172] and former Yugoslavia, Simić highlighted how the Yugoslavian "prototype" was heavily reliant on intergenerational and interpersonal relationships with extended family and kin, and where family was the core unit (Simić 1977). Its structures were patrilineal, patrilocal clan types with organization being "basically hierarchal in nature with the male principle and seniority dominant" (Simić 1977:58). Simić also noted that family organization and households had begun to change because of "tremendous social and demographic dislocations resulting from World War II, the subsequent socialist revolution, the industrialization of Yugoslavia, and the massive peasant migration from the countryside to urban areas…" (1977:59). Despite the changes, however, Simić concluded that the reliance on interpersonal relationships remained with "vitality" and was "all-absorbing" (59).

Just as Simić noted during his time in the mid-1970s, elders in today's Bulgaria remain engaged with cultural values tied to relationships within the family or extended out from it. As the chapters in this dissertation have shown, the elderly look to family for aspects of emotional well-being that occur during weekly or seasonal visits. This support includes "rituals of renewal" and ritualized maintenance between family members (Climo 1988).

[172] Simić (1977) noted that in the United States, the cultural aspects of a person's development from birth to maturity relied on atomization, independence from families, and active engagement with friendships networks. As such, he noted that the American socialization model was laden with the "assumption of peer group solidarity and communality" (Simić 1977:56), something which would seem to naturally lead to elders' disengaging from interpersonal relationships and to decline with the loss of those contacts and other roles in old age (see Simić 1977: 58). He wrote, "It seems inevitable that the aged, caught up in a system stressing individual psychological and socio-economic independence, and in which excellency is judged in terms of dedication and virtuosity in the performance of occupation tasks, deprived of their work status, and lacking a system of intense interdependence with children and kin, are left in a state of cultural and social semi-isolation in their declining years" (Simić 1977: 58).

In the absence of family members, elders recount that they are lonely and sad, but they have not severed with role obligations or filial responsibilities. The greater the family distance, the more challenges the elderly may feel. However, as Fry (2009) explains, the chain value of family still stretches across towns or borders and is elastic. This even extends past conceptions of family found in neighboring towns or abroad, and follows into death where, as we have seen, obligations and ties to family (and other) relationships persist.

Engagement is not only Cultural…

It is important to note that Simić and others have argued that not only culture affects the aging process. Other aspects of structure and experiences within people's lives drive their practices.

> As valuable as a broader understanding of the aging process in cross-cultural perspective may be, this comparison of intergenerational relations in America and Yugoslavia also strives to shed light on the more pervasive and as yet unresolved theoretical problem in the social sciences regarding the fit between overarching values on the one hand, and social structure and real behavior on the other. Thus, I have attempted to demonstrate a rough correlation between certain abstract, diffuse and transcendental ideas and specific behavioral manifestations in two contrasting social settings. However, it is not my intent simply to echo Ruth Benedict's (1934) contention that integration occurs in each culture within the matrix of a single theme that permeates the entire fabric of social life. In contrast, this essay proposes that culture is simply one of a number of imperatives present in the environment, and as such it has the tendency to channel behavior rather than to determine it absolutely (*cf.* Barth 1966) (Simić 1977:55).

Visiting family members in Bulgaria, for example, is not only a cultural tendency but it also provides an emotional support structure and moments of happiness for elders who feel isolated and alone with extended family gone. For this reason, some elders resist disengagement from roles and relationships and instead look forward to engaging even if they can't. The current work has

looked at those experiences of engagement in regard to stressors resulting from out-migration or the economic hardships associated with retirement and pensioners' lives.

There are also instances whereby elders are tied to engagement in tasks that are important to survival, such as with farming and livestock. Engagement for the elderly and their families, for example, also has economic value and importance. It provides helping family hands during canning or harvest season in a village. Many Bulgarian elderly in villages till garden plots for subsistence with some engaging in "informal economies" to sell produce. Where there used to be more people in villages to help with the fields and these garden plots, migration and searching for work have stretched families so that those remaining in place often till alone (unless a neighbor wants to offer a hand). The elderly would prefer to have family help, but often say that there's nobody around. When there is help, it may come from a source who traditionally would not be the first network alliance of choice. This then, results in a permutation in practice.

Also, Bulgarian elders' adherence to and adaptation of interpersonal relationships takes place within conceptions of change and continuities in networks (e.g. to family and other interpersonal patterns) and "in place." The crux of these relationships and the aging experience are situated within post-socialist Bulgaria and within the European Union. It is essential to understand this when exploring a group of people's experiences and reactions to processes or structures, especially an older generation who strategized around a centrist state system and relied heavily on interpersonal relationships for access to resources and economic support.

Academic literature on post-socialist rural lives concentrates on topics such as economic "involution" or survival with return to subsistence farming (e.g., Burawoy 1996; Burawoy et al. 2000). Some scholars explore colorful perceptions about nostalgia, especially in depressed and economically challenged communities (e.g., Berdahl 1999:206; Wolfe 2000:206 on Berdahl;

Yurchak 2006:10). Still others have noted that rather than mere "survival," informal economic practices and social ties have been part and parcel of everyday lives that, as De Certeau noted, people practice to "get by" (Smith 2010).

Concerning the aging experience and engagement in Bulgaria, then, findings point to varieties of ways that: 1) the elderly uphold and adapt interpersonal relationships as part of cultural and socio-economic practices and strategies; and 2) that some elders resist disengagement, stay engaged, and ultimately are tied to engagement. It is important to note, however, that the Bulgarian elders I met are not passively tied to engagement with their networks, culture, or other structures. They are active agents working in shifting types of networks and against stress.

Shifting Types of Network and Group Interactions Engaged Within and Against Stress

Because the elderly are engaged and because relationships lead to emotional and socio-economic aspects of well-being, the people I met try to foster networks. They follow culturally value-driven expectations that highlight mutual support and reciprocity from family and intergenerational ties. They also shift degrees of reliance on older types of interpersonal relationships and create new ones both because of and in response to stressors. In particular, the consequences associated with an aging landscape and depopulation from out-migration create a significant risk that interpersonal relationships might be dwindling. This leaves the elderly aging together in place, strategizing coping with their prior and present experiences, and sometimes seeking comradery among age cohorts of pensioner "peers." As such, the elderly can be seen as having memberships in groups that cope, strategize, and practice behaviors within lines of communication and action both together and with dominant structures.

As noted earlier, scholars have paid attention to how historical, socio-economic, and political structures have influenced the strong organization and reliance on relationships within

Eastern Europe. They have found, for example, processes involving family displacement from nation-state building and border changes (see for example Berdahl 1999); the world wars; and massive rural and urban migration internally due to socialist ideology and changes. These dominant forces altered family structures away from a dependence on large patriarchal household groups and extensions found in peasant societies, although there were differences in type (Botev 1990:112 and mentioning Todorova 1996; Creed 1998:131-134 also citing Mosely 1940; De Vos and Sandefur 2002:25 on Todorova; Hajnal 1982:454 in specific; Hoffman 1964). The alteration of these general family categories created new trends as well as survival strategies based on older patterns such as division of labor or gendered family duties (see for example Creed 1998, mainly 134-138).

Few studies on the region have looked at how the elderly have actively navigated such alterations as groups. What studies might come close are those that involve the complexities of nostalgia. The current study extends work on nostalgia by arguing that the elderly are not passive sub-cultures located on the fringe of their larger social relationships and dominant structures.

Bulgarian Elders and Nostalgia

A major cause of shifting relationships among Bulgarian elderly living in villages and small towns, is that a depopulating and aging landscape has resulted in many elderly aging in place with family and intergenerational ties now dispersed and stretched. This means that now, more than before, the elderly are grouped together in places which they interact together or form for themselves and their practices. The Northwestern Village, for example, has become a type of "retirement community" with villagers noting that only pensioners live there. This is not the type of retirement and community space that scholars such as Myerhoff (1980), Oliver (2008), or Vesperi (1998) have investigated in which the elderly entered in mature age either out of need,

choice, or other reasons. Aging and depopulating villages in Bulgaria involve people who remain in changing places where occupational jobs have disappeared (although subsistence gardening or farming work exists), material and organizational infrastructure has broken down, and younger generations have moved away to visit occasionally but rarely to return.

Many of the elderly I met interacted with the above stressors through nostalgia. As nostalgia coming from the elderly in these spaces, one could run the risk of placing their tales alongside passive memory processes or within avenues of longing. Post-socialist studies, however, have looked at nostalgia for complexities that occur in communications about people's past, presents, and possible futures. They have examined categories of paradox (Yurchak 2006); irony (Velikonja 2009; Bošković 2013), and reflections (Boym 2001). Yurchak (2006) stresses that paradoxes look beyond binaries of post-socialist categories. Nostalgia is ironic when one realizes that it does not imply a wish to return to the past (Velikonja 2009; Bošković 2013; Todorova 2009). As reflection, Boym notes that, "A modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home" at the same time (2001:50).

I have argued that the Bulgarian elders I met formed a "post-socialist" group, an age cohort with overlapping experiences and histories from times prior to after socialism, whose nostalgia helped them cope. Their nostalgia offered complex tales that also functioned for personal reflection and resiliency. Findings from my study included nostalgia working as "timely tales" that are not the elderly's passive longing for by-gone days. Rather they are active communication about and to structural forces within the present. They further negotiate temporalities particularly in tandem with Toshko's time (a past time under the Communist Party and state socialism) and democracy. And finally, "timely tales" also overlap with and within systems that people experience, whether

in the past or present. This means that they are timely for coping and "coeval" to processes (Boym 2001 on "coeval").

Looking at nostalgia as "timely tales" contributes to post-socialist scholars' explorations on nostalgia's paradoxical, ironic, and reflective nature. However, it also places nostalgia along scales of three productive and positive coping strategies – humor, adjustment, and compartmentalization. Ironic and paradoxical nostalgia bleed together to incorporate strategies involved with humor and "adjusting expectations" (SEMEL Institute 2017). These draw upon and highlight multiple angles of past experiences that seep into the present. For example, the northwestern grandfather I met who told me that current times were no different from the past, underscored the ironic aspects of power struggles with political systems and networks across time (see Chapter 5). Paradoxical tales also offered comedy and situational irony as with a favorite saying that in the past socialist times people had money but no things to buy. In the present democracy, there are things to buy, but no money. This type of nostalgic story stresses mechanisms that people have faced to adjust their expectations and life experiences.

Reflection in nostalgic "timely tales" merges with cognitive coping strategies that help people compartmentalize their current lives. As strategy, compartmentalization incorporates the ways people organize their conflicting beliefs or values (changingminds.org 2002-2016). Concerning post-socialist nostalgia, scholars today have recently written about the largest conflict of all – people do not wish to return to the past. "Most interesting today is 'post-communist nostalgia as a special memory case" historian Maria Todorova writes. "Lamenting the losses that came with the collapse of state socialism does not imply wishing it back" (Todorova 2009). Regardless if people are indeed simultaneously "homesick" and "sick of home," as Boym (2001)

suggests, they are able to separate the past from the present and work alongside both so as to be able to try to "move forward."

Another Way of Thinking: Co-Culturally Theorizing Bulgarian Elders

I have argued that nostalgia's place in a village of retired elders (or small towns), is that of "timely tales" through which a group of elderly is engaged in coping strategies. These aging places also include current tales that the elderly recount about their social and economic experiences as pensioners. Or, they include membership in pensioners' clubs where elders choose to get together in communication and interaction. Another possible way of exploring the elderly's tales and agency for coping and resiliency is through a "co-cultural theorizing" framework (Orbe 1998; Orbe and Roberts 2012).

Originally a communication theory stemming from cultural phenomenology, standpoint, and muted theories, the framework has been used for a variety of research including those outside of communication studies and for "co-cultural theorizing across the world" (Orbe and Roberts 2012:303). As Orbe notes, "… the unique contribution of the ongoing research termed co-cultural theory is that it explores the common patterns of communication both across and within these different marginalized groups" (1998:3). The framework and its extensions give "co-cultures" (rather than sub-cultures) voices and offers forth their perspectives (Orbe 1998). It also works on two assumptions, the second of which sets forth that these co-cultures have 9 "communication orientations." As Orbe writes they negotiate these "…to confront oppressive dominant structures and achieve any measure of success…" (1998:7). Co-cultural group members also adopt approaches (nonassertive, assertive, and aggressive) which are linked to preferred outcomes (accommodation, assimilation, and separation). **Appendix H** offers a listing of co-cultural theorizing's outlined approaches, preferred outcomes, orientations, and practices.

Elderly Pathways and Innovations Leading to Resiliency

I have argued that the many elderly I met in Bulgaria are busy and actively strategizing spaces and networks of interpersonal relationships which help them maintain aspects of "well-being" despite major stressors in their lives.[173] Being tied to this engagement, the relationships and spaces they foster follow culturally value-driven forms of interpersonal and intergenerational relationships. The elderly also adapt relationships based on memberships, proximity, and needs – such as the example of a blind woman being cared for by a paid village community member in the absence of family. The elderly are able to cope with stress and create innovations that allow glimpses of continuities and permutations to social organization or practices.

For example, shifts in strategies have created shifting degrees of reliance with and among people finding themselves together in shrinking locales. As extended families have moved away, the elderly interact more frequently with immediate families who are left in place or nearby, and seasonally with families abroad and away. Within their environment, the elderly might have to rely on neighbors more and more because of proximity. Some still socialize in backyards or in village public spaces or adapt socialization to visits. Other people note that there is a lack of socialization between peers or that people have turned "bad." Also, age cohorts can now be seen as members within aging villages and pensioners' clubs that are interactive with structural forces.

These strategies and adaptations contribute to investigations of landscapes of aging, cultural scripts and spaces, and "elderscapes," as scholars interested in cross-cultural explorations of aging have referred to them (Sokolovsky 2009: xxiv). As Sokolovsky notes, there has been development in parts of the world of "a dramatic connection of emergent scripts of aging with new

[173] There are many definitions of resiliency and the current work highlights ways that resiliency involves people interacting with adversity internally and with others in their social worlds, such as with their coping strategies/styles and social supports (see Harrington and Boardman 1997:2, 174-177 for resiliency).

interconnected sets of cultural spaces for experiencing late adulthood" (2009: xxiv). These include "landscapes for aging" where the elderly engage in social lives that are active and creative (Sokolovsky 2009: xxiv referring to Cohen specifically for this term; see Ewald 2005 on Cohen). And finally, exploring the elderly's creativity within landscapes of or for aging ultimately leads to cross-cultural discoveries on "topographies" taking place in people's lives (see Katz 2009 for topography and "elderscapes").

Furthermore, scholars in anthropology or cross-cultural studies of aging have approached examining "topographies" of aging in various ways, all of which add complexity and an amazing amount of diversity to our repertoire of knowledge. One way they have done this is by looking at "two universal sets of social relations – the kinship systems generated by rules and practices of descent and marriage and the broader social networks that bind people within and often across communities" (Sokolovsky 2009:371 and 373 on "kinscripts"). Another avenue of investigation has included exploring the "shifts in planning" and managing aging both among the aged and because of changing demography in areas (Sokolovsky 2009:375). Myerhoff (1980) and Lamb (2000) have been noted scholars in this area with the first looking at status and roles in a Jewish senior center, and the second examining changes to aging in India (Sokolovsky 2009). There is also a stress on "rethinking community" (Sokolovsky 2009:377) and networks to fully examine their plasticity and complexities. As Sokolovsky notes:

> In seeking to understand the importance of informal social ties in meeting the needs of the elderly, one level of analysis has concentrated on the study of "social networks" –ego-centered sets of personal links and their interconnections generated among friends, kin and neighbors (Sokolovsky 2006). Network analysis has been particularly useful for studying urban settings where social action is not readily understood within the context of traditional social structures, such as the totemic clans of the Tiwi or East African age sets.
>
> Ironically, while measures of informal social interaction have been viewed as crucial in gerontological theory and research, too many studies have failed to examine the qualitative

characteristics and cultural meaning that social networks hold for the elderly (Sokolovsky 2009: 377).

Findings in this dissertation show that the elderly's innovations and "topographies"[174] of aging, are those that sustain and adapted elders' peer, neighbor or friendship, and family networks for "well-being" and in culturally specific ways. These included:

1. Innovative efforts at using space such as converting a village egg shack into a "pensioners' club" to provide villagers an area to play games, watch television outside of their home, or simply to sit and chat. Pensioners' clubs offer age-cohorts places to come together and not only share experiences but also to respond to dominant political, economic, and social forces affecting them. Rather than being seen as vulnerable, their gatherings in clubs allow for interactions with each other and forces at play in their lives, such as with family gone from economically driven out-migration. Interaction in pensioners' Clubs might further be explored through a "co-cultural" lens (Orbe 1998; Orbe and Roberts 2012) to examine how the elderly's narratives advance complex understanding of positionality and offer them voice.

2. "Topographies" of aging were spaces people came together for coffee in downstairs rooms, cafés, and backyards. These practices offered respite from daily life and isolation, and could further be explored as "third" spaces or "home away from home," as found within Oldenburg's conception of these types of "landscapes" (Oldenburg 1999). Ultimately, like pensioners' clubs, these were areas created "by the elderly for the elderly" (Tsuji 2009).

3. Through family visiting from near and far, neighbors, and obligations to those long dead but not gone, elderly and their networks created times and areas for people to offer both "instrumental" and "salient support" (see Roy and Hamilton 1992:281 and Völker and Flap 1997:255 on instrumental support; Scott and Roberto 1987 on salient support).

4. And finally, a village's efforts to retrieve a missing bell illustrated a continued reliance on interpersonal relationships that proved not only resilient, but also innovative, productive, and restorative.

In the end, these practices resulted in innovations that have led to aspect of "well-being" that take into account happiness, health, practicality, and access to resources for some of the elderly. They

[174] As mentioned in Chapter 7, my use of "topography" is borrowed from Katz (2009).

also highlight resiliency, an ability to adapt to or manage difficulties despite circumstances and for more positive outcomes. This is an important area for continued research.

Recommendations for Future Inquiry

This work has documented the importance of sustaining and negotiating interpersonal relationships and networks for Bulgarian elders aging in place and for their "well-being." An underlying hypothesis has been that the risk of dwindling interpersonal relationships pose a significant stress to elderly in a depopulating and aging landscape. Despite this, the people I met are busy strategizing spaces and networks along lines of culturally valued pathways and new ones. They also engage in active lines of coping. They further prove not only actively engaged, but also innovative, resourceful, and resilient.

As such, findings have contributed to a body of knowledge that focuses on cultural variations of the aging experience and which challenge conceptions of the elderly as marginal or vulnerable. They also suggest possible avenues for further inquiry particularly in the following three research areas: 1) post-socialist studies and cross-disciplinary explorations of the aging experience (or aging experiences); 2) further explorations of aging in place and other aging landscapes; and 3) "well-being" and resiliency.

Post-Socialist Studies and Cross-disciplinary Explorations of the Aging Experience

Focusing on the elderly in Bulgaria, the current work has examined how the people I met could be seen as peers who are growing old in place, talk and identify as groups of pensioners, or have constructed memberships in pensioners' clubs. In taking this approach, the current work has also attempted to merge lines of investigation from post-socialist and aging studies.

As mentioned previously, one way it has done this is to examine "nostalgia's" place: 1) as the elderly's complex understandings of past and present experiences working in tandem; and 2)

as “timely tales” that use paradox, irony, and reflection for coping. Furthermore, popular and academic discourse in Bulgaria point to the elderly as vulnerable. Rather than looking at the elderly as only vulnerable, it is more beneficial to look at them through concepts of “agency.” Employing frameworks like “co-cultural theorizing” – a communicative approach that can be coupled with a multiple of other theories – allows marginal groups to have voices (Orbe 1998). While I did not use “co-cultural theorizing” to examine the elders’ nostalgia, new investigations using the framework on that type of communication could enrich both aging and post-socialist studies regarding people’s practices and narratives.

Continuing cross-disciplinary mergers such as these would also contribute to a growing interest both within Bulgaria and Eastern Europe for a “Sociology of Aging” (see for example Perek-Białas and Hoff’s 2012 work). During my time in the field, colleagues shared conference paper collections and articles that explored a variety of issues. These included perceptions of aging, demography and migration, housing, healthy aging, care, area studies, policy, material and economic standards, and retirement. Most of this work heavily relies on quantitative research. It would be enhanced with qualitative studies, anthropological approaches on aging, and post-socialist explorations of people living in place. This last suggestion might be particularly important to address for the “very old” in Bulgaria as a means of capturing their experiences before it’s too late.

Further Avenues for Aging within Place, “Elderscapes” and Landscapes of Aging

Explorations within the present work uncovered innovative practices and spaces within which the elderly I met in Bulgaria both live and construct. Part of active and resilient aging experiences, I have argued that the elderly in this study are not passively aging in place. They are aging within and with places that can be examined alongside scholarly investigations of new landscapes of aging, cultural scripts and spaces, and “elderscapes” (see Sokolovsky 2009: xxiv).

Drawing on conceptions such as Katz's (2009), Sokolovsky's (2009), or others' investigations of emerging "elderscapes"[175] (see Chapter 7) this work has explored innovations (a new pensioners' club in a village facing extinction or the elders' growing interest in Skype) and topographies (spaces for coffee-time) as the elderly's accommodations, responses, and adaptations to global processes like out-migration and in ways that challenge perceptions of age.

While often seen as at risk and vulnerable within an aging and depopulating landscape, the elderly I met also engage in spaces and with people in ways they create for themselves (such as in first-floor rooms or backyards) (see Tsuji 2009 on spaces for the elderly by the elderly). Or, they engage in these spaces and with people in ways that tap into opportunities (computer lessons provided by foundation funding or administrative funding for a pensioners' club). As Sokolovsky noted, such continued exploration is important because it shows how "the variable nature of community organization relates to well-being in old age" and how "alternative social spaces" also "accommodate the changing perception of aging itself" (2009:380). The current work spotlights three of these in Bulgaria (pensioners' clubs, coffee-time spaces, and neighborhood networks) though one will be highlighted for future research – neighborhood networks.

Neighbors and Neighborhood Landscapes of Support

Scholars working within gerontology and anthropology of the aging have recently begun looking at new ways of exploring both the neighborhood as place and neighborhood networks for

[175] "Elderscapes" is a conception that Katz drew from gerontological and spatial inquiry on institutional ethnographies, "aging in place," and community networks (2009:463). Looking beyond the purview of when people retire, Katz linked examinations of "mobility, residence, and community" to where elders retire and how they create "cultural spaces of retirement" (2009:463). Key issues that he explored at such sites (defined as elderscapes) within Florida focused on providing sketches of migration retirements' complexities and dynamics, and "global processes whereby technologies, networks, and populations are identified by their movements across geo-social spaces rather than by their locations within them" (Katz 2009:463-464). Scholars today have been exploring "elderscapes" to investigate older adults emergent use of cultural spaces and technology (Danely 2015), or to document how elders engage with cities or in engagement with other elderly in India or Nepal (see Mayer and Mandoki's "Elderscapes" project).

the elderly's well-being. They have traditionally done so within network analysis frameworks or community studies. These scholars have also been interested in investigating elements of what one could consider part of both topologies and topographies of social support for people within their neighborhood environments. Elements from those works that my study considers have included the importance of proximity and necessity on permutations of support.

Proximity and interactions through necessity offer not only networks for "support" (Wenger 1991 on typologies) or well-being (Gardner 2011) in neighborhoods, but they also offer opportunities for "care for place" and "nurturing relationships" (Wiles and Jayasinha 2013:98). Falling within research involving active aging in place, Wiles and Jayasinha (2013) examined how elderly contribute to their neighborhoods to conclude that there have been innovations involving significant "care roles":

> The findings of this study demonstrate that through activism, advocacy, volunteering, and nurturing the participants assumed a variety of care roles in their communities. This included helping and representing others, giving advice and support, or facilitating action, whether individually or as part of a group. Participants were involved in collective activities, either as part of formal community-based organisations, such as Grey Power, or more informal groups, such as the mobility scooter group, as well as more individual and personal activities. Their activities include helping, nurturing, and individual fulfilment, but they are also focused on broader social, political, environmental, and institutional changes (Wiles and Jayasinha 2013:100).

In neighborhood studies where adherence to family ties and kinship was the most significant type of social interaction found, albeit not the only networks elderly relied on, there was still a place for neighbors (see Roy and Hamilton 1992). In the case of elderly Italian immigrants living in Australia, for example, Roy and Hamilton found that while kin and then friendship networks were the most utilized networks for social support, "other friends and neighbours interactions were chiefly based on proximity and common interests and were primarily a source of instrumental support with everyday tasks" (1992: 281).

Finally, some scholars have taken a look at the importance of the neighborhood space itself as "third places" and "transitory zones" for elderly "aging in place" (Gardner 2011:263-264). Oldenburg's (1999 edition) work on third places has gained attention in studies that look at how people negotiate activities (in particular in cafés and other areas outside of work and home) for a sense of well-being and even comfort (see Gardner 2011:266).[176] Gardner, found elderly well-being in these spaces where engagement in the local grocery store or in front of home "encourage *natural* relationships and interactions" within a neighborhood (e.g. to create "natural neighborhood networks") and were not "forced" interactions:

> Third places and transitory zones encourage relationships and interactions. Natural in this context means they are not 'forced' or 'formal' (i.e. they were not paid service staff, volunteers from support agencies, or professionals), nor are they 'familial'. Instead, these interactions are more universally shared (e.g., across age groups), often spontaneous, informal, everyday, encounters and relationships with non-family members. Analysis highlighted three central types of these relationships – relationships or proximity (neighbors), relationships of service (business personnel including cab drivers, sales clerks and wait staff), and relationships of chance (strangers). Together these relationships shape participants' informal, neighborhood social network, or their "natural neighborhood network (NNN)" (Gardner 2011:267).

Although Simić (1977) noted that immediate family and other kinships networks were remaining strong in the region during structural change (such as with urbanization), he didn't delve into neighborhood networks and the significance of neighbors to the elderly in Eastern Europe. His arguments were based on the saliency of family as a corporate unit among generations and for the elderly.

Findings from my work in Bulgaria have highlighted some shifts in elders' culturally expected and degrees of reliance on family, peer, and neighborhood networks for support and well-

[176] The theory, for example, could be applied to look at the sense of well-being and support felt through coffee times among elderly as further examinations of third spaces. However, because some of those moments occurred at home (for example with Lelia and her friends) and included rules of engagement, I choose to look to "elderscapes" and topographies.

being. These shifts are in response to stressors such as out-migration and are based on proximity and necessity. Because of proximity and necessity, some neighbors provide networks of emotional support through visits and coffee time chatting. Other means of support might include neighbors lending a helping hand in the garden or around the house. There were also instances of "monitoring" (Prendergast et al. 2009) for health and as a "neighborhood watch" over material items. Not all neighbors and neighborhood networks provided this support, and not all shifts in neighborly relations were seen as positive.

Because global trends in out-migration and the aging population that Bulgaria faces by 2050 offer concern for the elderly's future, exploring neighborhood networks and the types of support they offer can provide insight on how the elderly negotiate aspects of well-being based on proximity, necessity, and even a varying ethos of hospitality, sociability, and help. It is a fruitful endeavor to continue looking for both continuations (e.g., neighborly help offering a hand) and permutations (e.g., paid care among community members in the absence of family) of practice within these neighborhoods and relationships as a further avenue of research on aging in Bulgaria, with the region, and cross-culturally. Such research would help uncover further types or "topologies" or changing "topographies" of aging in neighborhoods and among neighbors.[177]

Well-Being and Resiliency

In 2012 and when going into "the field" for research, a Bulgarian scholar working on demographic issues asked me if I were conceptualizing the elderly that I met (in this case within northwestern Bulgaria) as being "happy." His question had an undertone of skepticism and was based on one understanding of what "well-being" means within aging studies. The current work

[177] A variety of possible "elderscapes" exist in Bulgaria. While I did not focus on them in the current work, these include: 1) exploring working pensioners in shops owned by family abroad; 2) mapping the aging landscape of grandparents caring for grandchildren while those children's families are away; 3) examining elders adapting and co-opting "culture" as tourism within ethnographic complexes and entire villages. These were other topographies of aging that I saw in Bulgaria that would be promising topics for future research.

has not stressed well-being as "happiness." Well-being has multiple dimensions. Throughout my research the elderly exhibited resiliency and aspects of well-being.

In an article reviewing a recent publication on resiliency in aging studies, Manning (2015) underscores an important motivation for the field's future efforts in gerontology. She writes:

> The ability to negotiate hardships and adversity over the course of one's life, in a manner that promotes well-being and enhances quality of life, is motivating a resilience-focused research and practice agenda within gerontology. It befits researchers, clinicians, policymakers, and general members of the lay public to understand and implement key domains of resilience (Manning 2015: 703).

These domains, include multidimensional treatments, definitions, and explorations of resiliency that span complex systems and understandings of aging processes and human experiences (Manning 2015; Perkins 2014). One such definition involves transforming adversity, learning from it, and moving "'forward" (Randall 2013:9 on Hengudomsub). In aging, the concept of moving forward offers a positive way of looking at how people are still alive. As Randall notes:

> Despite various adversities they've faced through-out their lives, certain people inspire us by their gift of keeping positive and open as the years advance: still learning and contributing – still *growing* old and not just getting old. We call such people *resilient* (Randall 2013:9).

My work with Bulgarian elders has explored different aspects of the elderly still being alive (although they may not always be positive). The premise of well-being on these elders' lives has been that of resiliency in response to adversity and isolation. These responses also relied on and were derived from culturally value-driven behaviors and practices that upheld the importance of interpersonal relationships in spite of hardships. As such the current work adds to studies on resiliency through which one advocates exploring, "how individuals persist through adversities while negotiating everyday issues in life" (Manning 2015:703). It also added to these studies with a qualitative emphasis.

Further and more systematic research on resilience and aging in Bulgaria is needed, particularly in regards to saliency of support and human connections (see Manning's 2015 review on Lavretsky and emphasis on social support and resilience). Given the adverse trajectory that many have outlined for the country's aging and depopulating landscape, future changes may be in store when the "very old" pass, especially for the next generation. These are the current Bulgarian elders' offspring who are often far from home-communities within the country and abroad. When this happens, we may see completely new configuration of human connections of aging in Bulgarian cultural and social space. However, just as the current work has hypothesized that the most significant stress to the elderly's well-being in Bulgaria is the risk of dwindling interpersonal relationships, we may also see further continuities and adaptations to these and to the aging experience that provide resilient to that risk.

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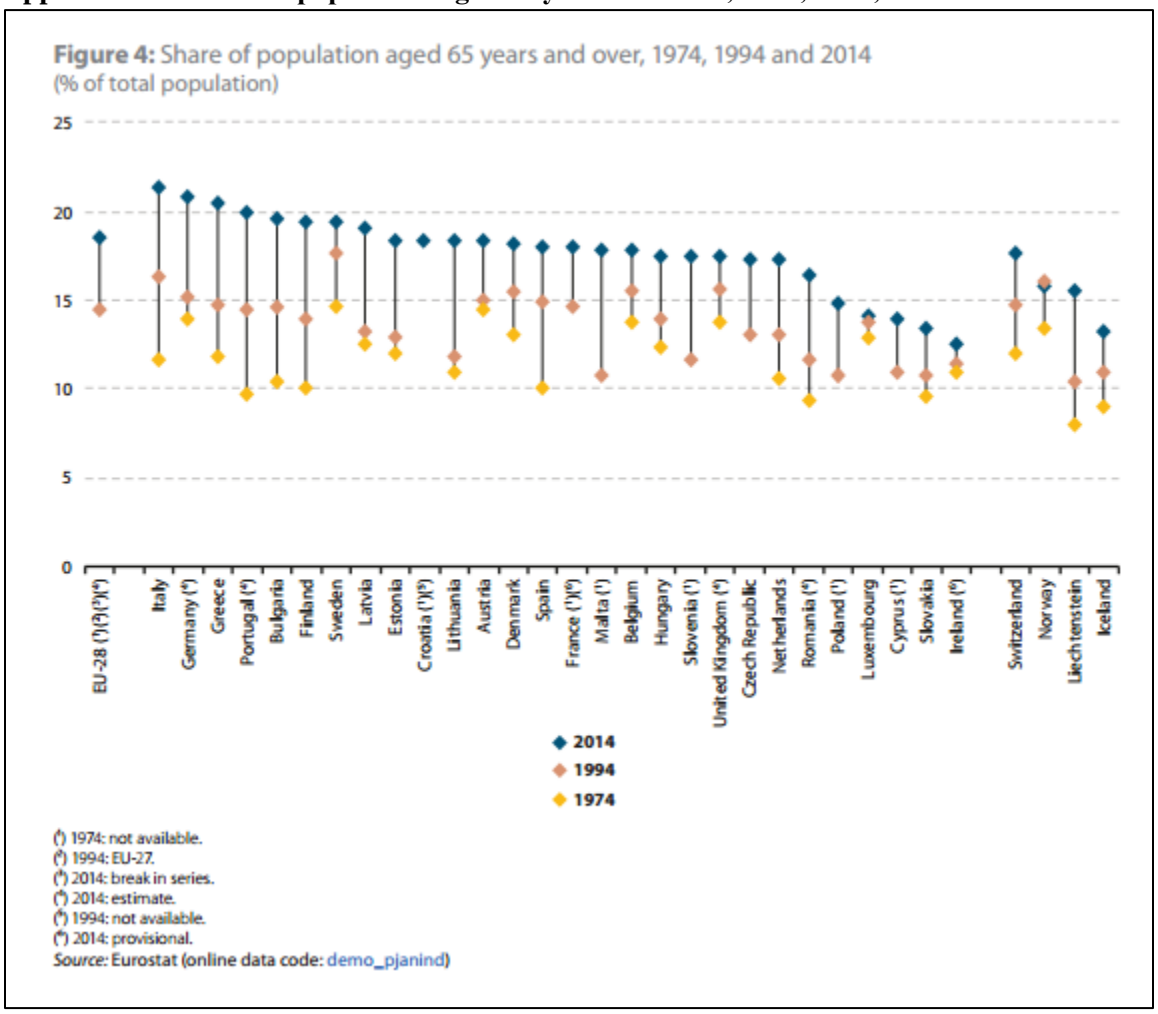
Appendices

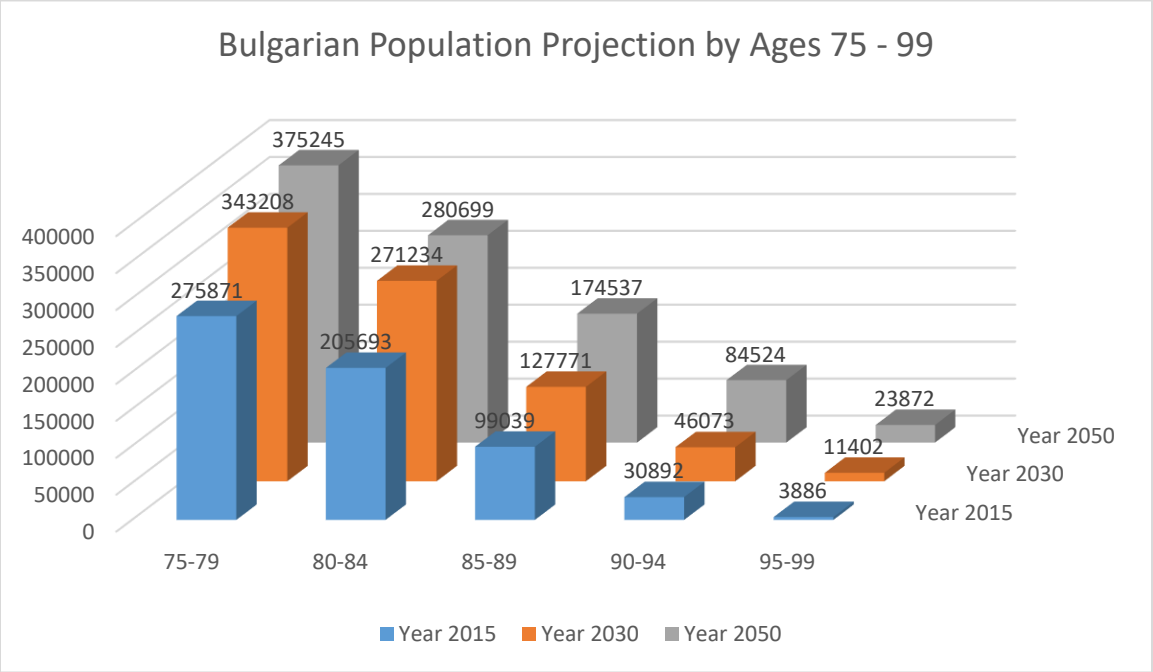
Appendix A: "Share of population aged 65 years and over, 1974, 1994, 2014"



Source: Eurostat (2015). "People in the EU: who are we and how do we live?" (Chapter 6 An ageing society - focus on the elderly), Eurostat Statistical Books, European Union, pg. 137

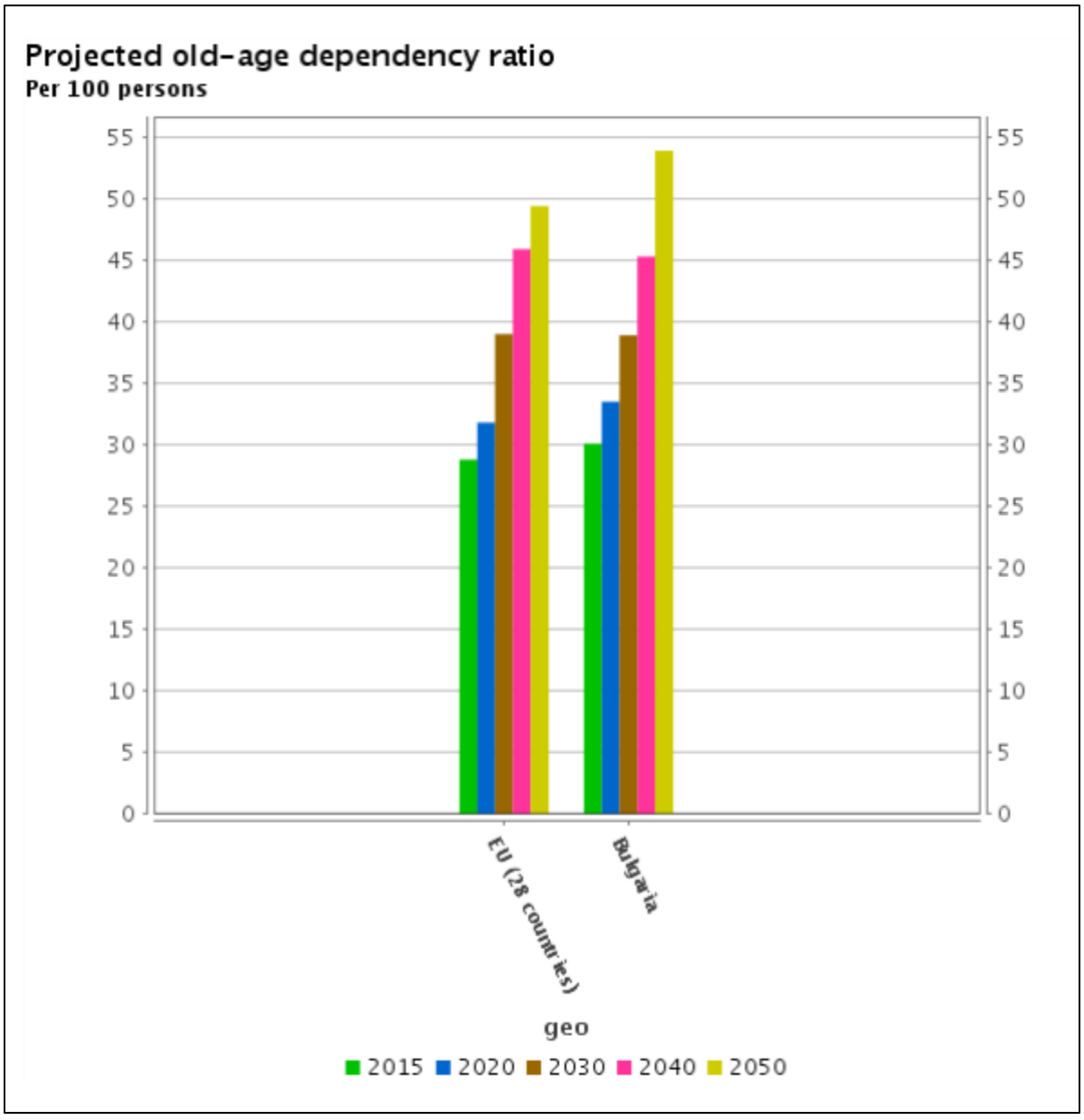
Accessed online at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/3217494/7089681/KS-04-15-567-EN-N.pdf/8b2459fe-0e4e-4bb7-bca7-7522999c3bfd on April 24, 2016

Appendix B: Bulgarian Population Projection 2015 to 2050 by Ages 75-99 (Male and Female Combined)



Source: Source data from National Statistical Institute (www.nsi.bg) generated by INFOSTAT and adapted on April 24, 2016

Appendix C: Bulgaria and EU28: Projected Old Age Dependency Ratio (2015-2050)



Source: Eurostat (source data reported from Eurostat – Population projections EUROPOP2013)

Note: Customized report created from Eurostat software and accessed online at http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/graph.do?pcode=tsdde511&language=en on April 24, 2016

Appendix D: Map of Bulgaria 2015 and Field Site Areas Shaded

Source: Original map Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas Austin (The Perry Castañeda Library Map Collection)
Map Listed From: the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency
Accessed online at http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/cia15/bulgaria_sm_2015.gif on April 23, 2016 and adapted for this study's purpose.

Legend
Red highlighted area – Approximate area of main research with the Northwestern Village in the north of Bulgaria.
Yellow highlighted area – Approximate area of main research with the Southern Town in the south of Bulgaria.

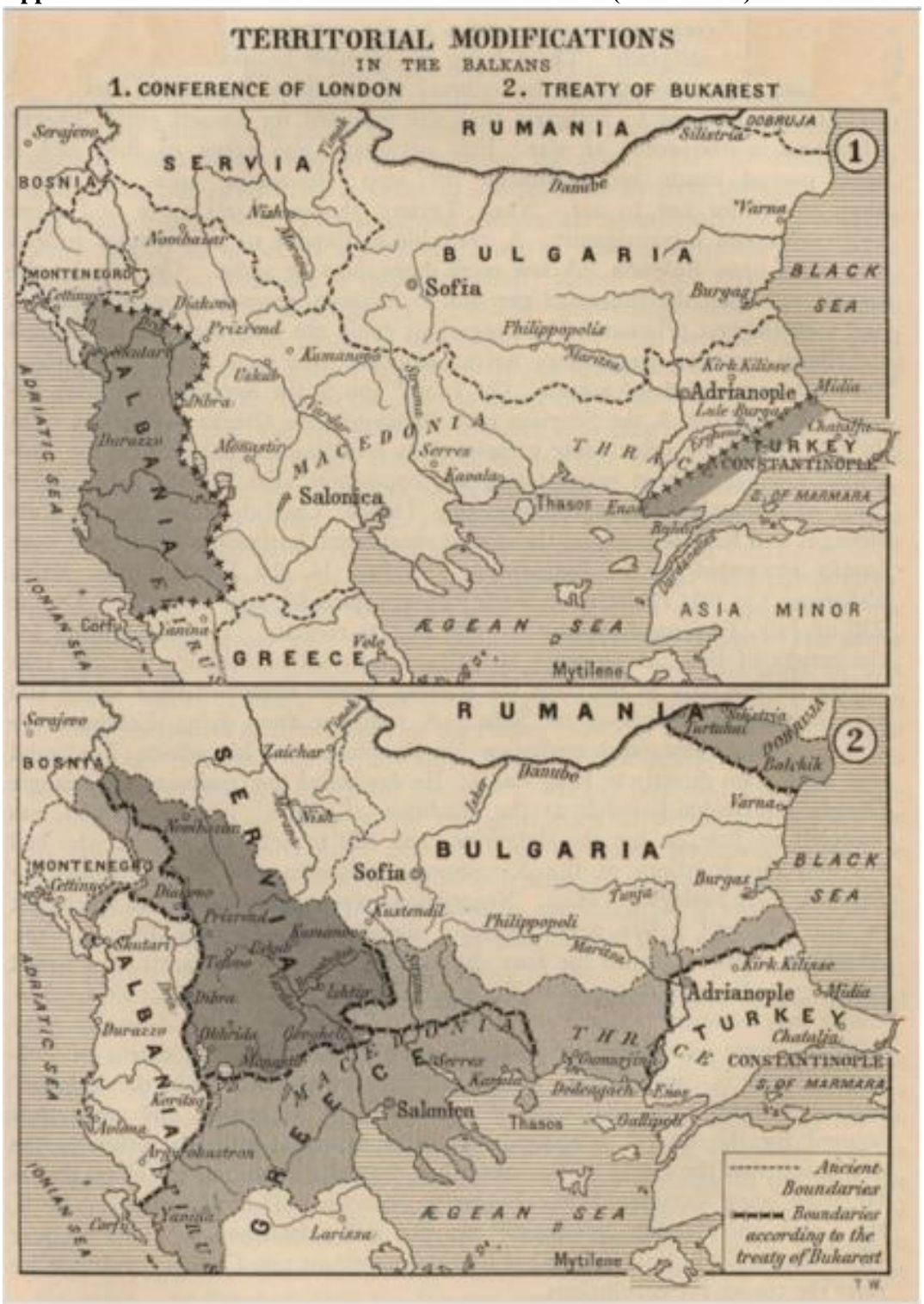
Appendix E: Map of Bulgaria Under the Time of Asparuch and Tervel (First Bulgarian Empire)

Source: Rozoff, Dimitar. *The Bulgariens in their historical, ethnographical and political frontiers*. Berlin. 1917 Copyright listed in the Public Domain and Accessed on Wikimedia Commons (Wikimedia Commons Atlas of the World - https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BulgarienAsparuchTervel.jpg) on April 23, 2016

Appendix F: "Changes in Turkey in Europe 1856 To 1878" (Bulgaria represented)

Source: Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas Austin (The Perry Castañeda Library Map Collection)
Map Listed From: The "Literary and Historical Atlas of Europe", J.G. Bartholomew, 1912.Accessed online at http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/balkans_1912.jpg on April 23, 2016 (enlarged by author).

Appendix G: "Territorial Modifications in the Balkans" (end of 1913)



Source: Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas Austin (The Perry Castañeda Library Map Collection)
Map Listed From: the "Report of the International Commission To Inquire into the Causes and Conduct of the Balkan Wars" 1914. Accessed online http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/balkan_modifications_1914.jpg on April 23, 2016 (enlarged by author).

Appendix H: Co-Cultural Theorizing – Approaches, Preferred Outcomes, Orientations, and Practices

	Assimilation	**Accommodation**	**Separation**
Nonassertive	Emphasizing commonalities Developing positive face Censoring Self Averting Controversy	Increasing visibility Dispelling stereotypes	Avoiding Maintaining barriers
Assertive	Extensive preparation Overcompensating Manipulating stereotypes Bargaining	Communicating self Intragroup networking Utilizing liaisons Educating Others	Exemplifying strength Embracing stereotypes
Aggressive	Dissociating Mirroring Strategic distancing Ridiculing Self	Confronting Gaining advantage	Attacking Sabotaging others

Source: Adapted from Orbe and Roberts 2012